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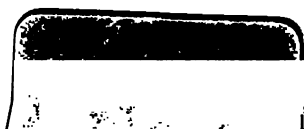
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'FOR PERCIVAL'

BY

MARGARET VELEY

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



LONDON

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1878

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OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.



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‘FOR PERCIVAL.’



CHAPTER I.

THORNS AND ROSES.

IT was a long, narrow, and rather low room, with four windows looking out on a terrace. Jasmine and roses clustered round them, and flowers lifted their heads to the broad sills. Within, the lighted candles showed furniture that was, perhaps, a little faded and dim, though it had a slender, old-fashioned grace which more than made amends for any beauty it had lost. There was much old china ; and on the walls were a few family portraits, of which their owner was justly proud ; and in the air there lingered a faint fragrance of dried rose-leaves, delicate yet unconquerable. Even the full tide of midsummer sweetness, which

flowed through the open windows, could not altogether overcome that subtle memory of summers long gone by.

The master of the house, with a face like a wrinkled waxen mask, sat in his easy-chair, reading the *Saturday Review*; and a lady, very like him, only with a little more colour and fulness, was knitting close by. The light shone on the old man's pale face and white hair, on the old lady's silver-grey dress and flashing rings; the knitting pins clicked, working up the crimson wool, and the pages of the paper rustled with a pleasant crispness as they were turned. By the window, where the candlelight faded into the soft shadows, stood a young man, apparently lost in thought. His face, which was turned a little towards the garden, was a noteworthy one, with its straight forehead and clearly marked level brows. His features were good, and his clear olive complexion gave him something of a foreign air. He had no beard, and his moustache was only a dark shadow on his upper lip, so that his mouth stood revealed as one which indicated reserve, though it was neither stern nor thin-lipped. Altogether it was a pleasant face.

A light step sauntering along the terrace, a low voice softly singing 'Drink to me only

with thine Eyes,' roused him from his reverie. He did not move, but his mouth and eyes relaxed into a smile as a white figure came out of the dusk exactly opposite his window, and singer and song stopped together.

'O Percival! I didn't know you had come out of the dining-room.'

'Twenty minutes ago. What have you been doing?'

'Wandering about the garden. What could I do on such a perfect night, but what I have been doing all this perfect day?'

She stood looking up at him as she spoke. She had an arch, beautiful face, the sort of face which would look well with patches and powder. Only it would have been a sin to powder the hair, which, though deep brown, had rich touches of gold, as if a happy sunbeam were imprisoned in its waves. Her eyes were dark, her lips were softly red; everything about Sissy Langton's face was delicate and fine. She lifted her hand to reach a spray of jasmine just above her head, and the lace sleeve fell back from her pretty, slender wrist.

'Give it to me—Percival, do you hear? Oh, what a tease you are!' For he drew it back when she would have gathered it. Mrs. Middleton was heard making a remark inside.

'You don't deserve it,' said Percival. 'Here is my aunt saying that the hot weather makes you scandalously idle.'

'Scandalously idle! Aunt Harriet!' Sissy repeated it in incredulous amusement, and the old lady's indignant disclaimer was heard, 'Percival! Most unusually idle, I said.'

'Oh, most unusually idle? I beg your pardon. But doesn't that imply a considerable amount of idleness to be got through by one person?'

'Yes—but you helped me,' said Sissy. 'Aunt Harriet, listen. He stood on my thimble ever so long, while he was talking this afternoon. How can I work without a thimble?'

'Impossible!' said Percival. 'And I don't think I can get you another to-morrow—I am going out. On Thursday I shall come back and bring you one that won't fit. Friday you must go with me to change it. Yes, we shall manage three days' holiday very nicely.'

'Nonsense. But it is your fault if I am idle.'

'Why, yes. Having no thimble you are naturally unable to finish your book, for instance.'

'Oh, I shan't finish that! I don't like it.'

The heroine is so dreadfully strong-minded, I don't believe in her. She never does anything wrong; and though she suffers tortures—absolute agony, you know—she always rises to the occasion—nasty thing !’

‘A wonderful woman,’ said Percival, idly picking sprays of jasmine as he spoke.

Sissy's voice sank lower. ‘Do you think there are really any women like that ?’

‘Oh, yes, I suppose so.’

She took the flowers which he held out, and looked doubtfully into his face. ‘But—do you *like* them, Percival ?’

‘Make the question a little clearer,’ he said. ‘I don't like your ranting, pushing, unwomanly women who can talk of nothing but their rights. They are very terrible. But heroic women——.’ He stopped short. The pause was more eloquent than speech.

‘Ah !’ said Sissy. ‘Well—a woman like Jael ? or Judith ?’

He repeated the name ‘Judith.’ ‘Or Charlotte Corday ?’ he suggested after a moment.

It was Sissy's turn to hesitate, and she compressed her pretty lips doubtfully. Being in the Old Testament, Jael must of course come out all right, even if one finds it difficult to like her. Judith's position is less

clear. Still it is a great thing to be in the Apocrypha, and their living so long ago and so far away makes a difference. But Charlotte Corday—a young Frenchwoman, not a century dead, who murdered a man, and was guillotined in those horrible revolutionary times—would Percival say *that* was the type of woman he liked?

'Well—Charlotte Corday, then?'

'Yes, I admire her,' he said slowly. 'Though I would rather the heroism did not show itself in bloodshed. Still she was noble—I honour her. I dare say the others were too, but I don't know so much about them.'

'What a poor little thing you must think me!' said Sissy. 'I could never do anything heroic.'

'Why not?'

'I should be frightened. I can't bear people to be angry with me. I should run away, or do something silly.'

'Then I hope you won't be tried,' said Percival.

She shook her pretty head. 'People always talk about casting gold into the furnace, and its coming out only the brighter and better. Things are not good for much if you would rather they were not tried.'

Her hand was on the window frame as

she spoke, and the young man touched a ring she wore. 'Gold is tried in the furnace—yes, but not your pearls. Besides, I'm not so sure that you would fail, if you were put to the test.'

She smiled, well-pleased, yet unconvinced.

'You think,' he went on, 'that people who did great deeds did them without an effort—were always ready like a bow always strung? No, no, Sissy, they felt very weak sometimes. Isn't there anything in the world you think you could die for? Even if you say "No" now, there may be something one of these days.'

The twilight hid the soft glow which overspread her face. 'Anything in the world you could die for?' Anything? Anybody? Her blood flowed in a strong, courageous current, as her heart made answer, 'Yes—for one.' But she did not speak, and after a moment her companion changed the subject. 'That's a pretty ring,' he said.

Sissy started from her reverie. 'Horace gave it me. Adieu, Mr. Percival Thorne; I'm going to look at my roses.'

'Thank you; yes, I shall be delighted to come.' And Percival jumped out. 'Don't

look at me as if I'd said something foolish. Isn't that the right way to answer your kind invitation.'

'Invitation! what next?' demanded Sissy with pretty scorn. And the pair went off together along the terrace, and into the fragrant dusk.

A minute later it occurred to Mrs. Middleton to fear that Sissy might take cold, and she went to the window to look after her. But, as no one was to be seen, she turned away, and encountered her brother, who had been watching them too. 'Do they care for each other?' he asked abruptly.

'How can I tell?' Mrs. Middleton replied. 'Of course she is fond of him in a way; but I can't help fancying sometimes that Horace——'

'Horace!' Mr. Thorne's smile was singularly bland. 'Oh, indeed! Horace—a charming arrangement. Pray how many more times is Mr. Horace to supplant that poor boy?' His soft voice changed suddenly, as one might draw a sword from its sheath. 'Horace had better not cross Percival's path, or he will have to deal with me. Is he not content? What next must he have?'

Mrs. Middleton paused. She could have answered him. There was an obvious reply,

but it was too crushing to be used, and Mr. Thorne braved it accordingly.

‘Better leave your grandsons alone, Godfrey,’ she said at last; ‘if you’ll take my advice—which I don’t think you ever did yet. You’ll only make mischief. And there is Sissy to be considered. Let the child choose for herself.’

‘And you think she can choose——
Horace?’

‘Why not?’

‘Choose Horace rather than Percival?’

‘I should,’ said the old lady with smiling audacity. ‘And I would rather she did. Horace’s position is better.’

Mr. Thorne uttered something akin to a grunt, which might, by courtesy, be taken for a groan. ‘Oh, how mercenary you women are! Well, if you marry a man for his money, Horace has the best of it—if he behaves himself. Yes, I admit that—*if he behaves himself.*’

‘And Horace is handsomer,’ said Mrs. Middleton with a smile.

‘Pink-and-white prettiness’; scoffed Mr. Thorne.

‘Nonsense!’ The colour mounted to the old lady’s forehead, and she spoke sharply. ‘We didn’t hear anything about that when

he was a lad, and we were afraid of something amiss with his lungs—it would have been high treason to say a syllable against him then. And now, though I suppose he will always be a little delicate (you'd be sorry if you lost him, Godfrey), it's a shame to talk as if the boys were not to be compared. They are just of a height, not half an inch difference, and the one as brave and manly as the other. Horace is fair, and Percival is dark; and you know, as well as I do, that Horace is the handsomer.'

Mr. Thorne shifted his ground. 'If I were Sissy I would choose my husband for qualities that are rather more than skin deep.'

'By all means. And still I would choose Horace!'

'What is amiss with Percival?'

'He is not so frank and open. I don't want to say anything against him; I like Percival, but I wish he were not quite so reserved.'

'What next?' said Mr. Thorne, with a short laugh. 'Why, only this morning you said he talked more than Horace!'

'Talked? Oh, yes, Percival can talk, and about himself too,' said Mrs. Middleton, with a smile. 'But he can keep his secrets all

the time. I don't want to say anything against him ; I like him very much——'

'No doubt,' said Mr. Thorne.

'But I don't feel quite sure that I know him. He isn't like Horace. You know Horace's friends——'

'Trust me for that.'

'But what do you know of Percival's ? I heard him tell Sissy he would be out to-morrow. Will you ever know where he went?'

'I shan't ask him.'

'No,' she retorted, 'you dare not ! Isn't it a rule that no one is ever to question Percival?'

'And while I'm master here it shall be obeyed. It's the least I can do. The boy shall come and go, speak or hold his tongue as he pleases. No one shall cross him—Horace least of all—while I'm master here, Harriet ; but that won't be very long.'

'I don't want you to think any harm of Percival's silence,' she answered gently. 'I don't for one moment suppose he has any secrets to be ashamed of. I myself like people to be open, that is all.'

'If I wanted to know anything, Percival would tell me,' said Mr. Thorne.

Mrs. Middleton's charity was great. She

hid the smile she could not repress. 'Well,' she said, 'perhaps I am not fair to Percival; but, Godfrey, you are not quite just to Horace.'

He turned upon her. 'Unjust to Horace? *I?*'

She knew what he meant. He had shown Horace signal favour, far above his cousin, yet what she had said was true. Perhaps some of the injustice had been in this very favour. 'Here are our truants!' she exclaimed. She and her brother had not talked so confidentially for years; but the moment her eyes fell on Sissy her thoughts went back to the point at which Mr. Thorne had disturbed them. 'My dearest Sissy, I am so afraid you will catch cold.'

'It can't be done to-night,' said Percival. 'Won't you come and try?' But the old lady shook her head.

'All right, auntie, we won't stop out,' said Sissy; and a moment later she made her appearance in the drawing-room with her hands full of roses, which she tossed carelessly on the table. Mr. Thorne had picked up his paper, and stood, turning the pages and pretending to read; but she pushed it aside to put a rosebud in his coat. 'Roses are more fit for you young people than for

an old fellow like me,' he said. 'Why don't you give one to Percival?'

She looked over her shoulder at young Thorne. 'Do you want one?' she said.

He smiled, with a slight movement of his head, and his dark eyes fixed on hers.

'Then why didn't you pick one when we were out? Now weren't you foolish? Well, never mind. What colour?'

'Choose for him,' said Mr. Thorne.

Sissy hesitated, looking from Percival's face to a bud of deepest crimson. Then, throwing it down, 'No, you shall have yellow,' she exclaimed; 'Laura Falconer's complexion is something like yours, and she always wears yellow. As soon as one yellow dress is worn out she gets another.'

'She is a most remarkable young woman if she waits till the first one is worn out,' said Percival.

'Am I to put your rose in or not?' Sissy demanded.

He stepped forward with a smile, and looked darkly handsome as he stood there, with Sissy putting the yellow rose in his coat, and glancing archly up at him. Mr. Thorne, from behind his *Saturday Review*, watched the girl who might, perhaps, hold his favourite's future in her hands. 'Does he

care for her?' he wondered. If he did, the old man felt that he would gladly have knelt to entreat her, 'Be good to my poor Percival!' But did Percival want her to be good to him? Godfrey Thorne was altogether in the dark about his grandson's wishes in the matter. He tried hard not to think that he was in the dark about every wish or hope of Percival's, and he looked up eagerly when the latter said something about going out the next day. He remembered which horse Percival liked, he assented to everything, but he watched him all the time with a wistful curiosity. He did not really care where Percival went; but he would have given much for such a word about his plans as would have proved to Harriet, and to himself too, that his boy *did* confide in him sometimes. It was not to be, however. Young Thorne had taken up the local paper, and the subject dropped. Mr. Thorne may have guessed later, but he never knew where his roan horse went the next day.

CHAPTER II.

'THOSE EYES OF YOURS.'

NOT five miles away, that same evening, a conversation was going on which would have interested Mrs. Middleton. She had not even heard the speakers' names, nor was she destined ever to know much of them, yet their fortunes touched the fortunes of those who were dearest to her. The old squire, too, might well have been interested, for his favourite's sake. Percival thought lightly enough of his acquaintance with these people, but for a little while it involved him in a maze of girlish caprices and mysteries, loves and hates, and, short as that time was, it changed the course of his life.

The scene was an upstairs room in a pleasant house near the county town. Mrs. Blake, a woman of seven or eight and forty, handsome and well preserved, but of a high-coloured type, leant back in an easy-chair,

lazily unfastening her bracelets, by way of signifying that she had begun to prepare for the night. Her two daughters were with her. Addie, the elder, was at the looking-glass brushing her hair, and half enveloped in its silky blackness. She was a tall, graceful girl, a refined likeness of her mother. On the rug lay Lottie, three years younger, hardly more than a growing girl, long limbed, slight, a little abrupt and angular by her sister's side, her features not quite so regular, her face paler in its cloud of dark hair. Yet there was a look of determination and power which was wanting in Addie; and at times, when Lottie was roused, her eyes had a dark splendour which made her sister's beauty seem comparatively commonplace and tame.

Stretched at full length, she propped her chin on her hands and looked up at her mother. 'I don't suppose you care,' she said, in a clear, almost boyish voice.

'Not much,' Mrs. Blake replied, with a smile. 'Especially as I rather doubt it.'

Addie paused, brush in hand. 'I really think you've made a mistake, Lottie.'

'Do you really? I haven't, though,' said that young lady decidedly.

'It can't be—surely,' Addie hesitated, with a little shadow on her face.

‘Of course not. Is it likely?’ said Mrs. Blake, as if the discussion were closed.

‘I tell you,’ said Lottie stubbornly, ‘Godfrey Hammond told me that Percival’s father was the eldest son.’

‘But it is Horace who has always lived at Brackenhill. Percival only goes on a visit now and then. Everyone knows,’ said Addie, in almost an injured tone, ‘that Horace is the heir.’

Lottie raised her head a little and eyed her sister intently, with amusement, wonder, and a little scorn in her glance. Addie, blissfully unconscious, went on brushing her hair, still with that look of anxious perplexity.

‘This is how it was,’ Lottie exclaimed suddenly. ‘Percival was just gone, and you were talking to Horace. Up comes Godfrey Hammond, sits down by me, and says some rubbish about consoling me. I think I laughed. Then he looked at me out of his little, light eyes, and said that you and I seemed to get on well with his young friends. So I said, “Oh, yes; middling.”’

‘Upon my word,’ smiled Mrs. Blake, ‘you appear to have distinguished yourself in the conversation.’

‘Didn’t I?’ said Lottie, untroubled and unabashed; ‘I know it struck me so at the

time. Then he said something—I forget how he put it—about our being just the right number, and pairing off charmingly. So I said, "Oh, of course! the elder ones went together, that was only right."

'And what did he say?'

'Oh, he pinched his lips together and smiled, and said, "Don't you know that Percival is the elder?"'

'But, Lottie, that proves nothing as to his father.'

'Who supposed it did? I said "Fiddle-dedee, I didn't mean that; I supposed they were much about the same age, or if Percy were a month or two older it made no difference. I meant that Horace was the eldest son's son, so of course he was A 1."

'Well?' said Addie.

'Well! then he looked twice as pleased with himself as he did before, and said, "I don't think Horace told you that. It so happens that Percival is not only the elder by a month or two, as you say, but he is the son of the eldest son." Then I said "Oh!" and mamma called me for something, and I went.'

Mrs. Blake and Addie exchanged glances.

'Now, could I have made a mistake?' demanded Lottie.

'It seems plain enough, certainly,' her mother allowed.

‘Then, could Godfrey Hammond have made a mistake? Hasn’t he known the Thornes all their lives, and didn’t he say once that he was named Godfrey after their old grandfather?’

Mrs. Blake assented.

‘Then,’ said the girl, relapsing into her recumbent position, ‘perhaps you’ll believe me another time.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Mrs. Blake; ‘we’ll see when the other time comes. If it is as you say, it is curious.’ She rose as she spoke, and went to the farther end of the room. As she stood by an open drawer putting away the ornaments which she had taken off, the candlelight revealed a shadow of perplexity on her face which increased the likeness between herself and Addie. Apparently Lottie was right as to her facts. The estate was not entailed, then, and despotic power seemed to be rather capriciously exercised by the head of the house. If Horace should displease his grandfather—if, for instance, he chose a wife of whom old Mr. Thorne did not approve—would his position be very secure? Mrs. Blake was uneasy, and felt that it was very wrong of people to play tricks with the succession to an estate like Brackenhill.

Meanwhile Lottie watched her sister, who

was thoughtfully drawing her fingers through her long hair. 'Addie,' she said, after a pause, 'what will you do if Horace isn't the heir after all?'

'What a silly question! I shan't do anything—there's nothing for me to do.'

'But shall you mind very much? You are very fond of Horace, aren't you?'

'Fond of him!' Addie repeated; 'he is very pleasant to talk to, if you mean that.'

'Oh, you can't deceive me so! I believe that you are in love with him,' said Lottie solemnly.

The colour rushed to Addie's face when her vaguely tender sentiments, indefinite as Horace's attentions, were described in this startling fashion. 'Indeed, I'm nothing of the kind,' she said hurriedly. 'Pray don't talk such utter nonsense, Lottie. If you have nothing more sensible to say, you had better hold your tongue.'

'But why are you ashamed of it?' Lottie persisted: 'I wouldn't be.' She had an unsuspected secret herself, but she would have owned it proudly enough had she been challenged.

'I'm not ashamed,' said Addie; 'and you know nothing about being in love, so you had better not talk about it.'

'Oh, yes, I do!' was the reply, uttered with Lottie's calm simplicity of manner; 'I know how to tell whether you are in love or not, Addie. What would you do if a girl were to win Horace Thorne away from you?'

Pride, and a sense of propriety, dictated Addie's answer and gave sharpness to her voice: 'I should say she was perfectly welcome to him!'

Lottie considered for a moment. 'Yes, I suppose one might *say* so to her; but what would you do? Wouldn't you want to kill her? And wouldn't you die of a broken heart?'

Addie was horrified. 'I don't want to kill anybody, and I'm not going to die for Mr. Horace Thorne. Please don't say such things, Lottie—people never do. You forget he is only an acquaintance.'

'No; I don't think you are in love with him, certainly.' Lottie pronounced this decision with the air of one who has solved a difficult problem.

'What are you talking about?' Mrs. Blake inquired, coming back, and glancing from Addie's flushed and troubled face to Lottie's thoughtful eyes.

'I was asking Addie if she didn't want Horace to be the heir. I know you do,

mamma—oh! just for his own sake, because you think he's the nicest, don't you? I heard you tell him one day'—here Lottie looked up with a candid gaze and audaciously imitated Mrs. Blake's manner—'that though we knew his cousin *first*, he—Horace, you know—seemed to drop *so* naturally into *all* our ways that it was quite *delightful* to feel that we needn't stand on *any* ceremony with him.'

'Good gracious, Lottie! what do you mean by listening to every word I say?'

'I didn't listen—I heard,' said Lottie. 'I always do hear when you say your words as if they had little dashes under them.'

'Well, Horace Thorne *is* easier to get on with than his cousin,' said Mrs. Blake, taking no notice of Lottie's mimicry.

'There, I said so; mamma would like it to be Horace. Nobody asks what I should like; nobody thinks about me and Percival.'

'Oh, indeed! I wasn't aware,' said Mrs. Blake; 'when is that to come off? I daresay you will look very well in orange blossoms and a pinafore!'

'Oh, you think I'm too young, do you? But a little while ago you were always saying that I was grown up, and oughtn't to want any more childish games. What was I to do?'

‘Upon my word!’ exclaimed Mrs. Blake; ‘I’ll buy you a doll for a birthday present, to keep you out of mischief.’

‘Too late,’ said Lottie, from the rug. She burst into sudden laughter, loud but not unmelodious. ‘What rubbish we are talking! seventeen to-morrow, and Addie is nearly twenty; and sometimes I think I must be a hundred!’

‘Well, you are talking nonsense now!’ Mrs. Blake exclaimed. ‘Why, you baby! only last November you would go into that wet meadow by the Rectory to play trap-and-ball with Robin and Jack. And such a fuss as there was if one wanted to make you the least tidy and respectable.’

‘Was that last November?’ Lottie stared thoughtfully into space. ‘Queer that last November should be so many years ago, isn’t it? Poor little Cock Robin! I met him in the lane the day before he went away. They will keep him in jackets, and he hates them so! I laughed at him, and told him to be a good little boy and mind his book. He didn’t seem to like it, somehow.’

‘I dare say he didn’t,’ said Addie, who had been silently recovering herself; ‘there’s no mistake about it when you laugh at anyone.’

‘There shall be no mistake about any-

thing I do,' Lottie asserted. 'I'm going to bed now.' She sprang to her feet, and stood looking at her sister: 'What jolly hair you've got, Addie!'

'Yours is just as thick, or thicker,' said Addie.

'Each individual hair is a good deal thicker, if you mean that. "Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horse-hairs!" That's what Percy quoted to me one day when I was grumbling, and I said I wasn't sure he wasn't rude. Addie, are Horace and Percival fond of each other?'

'How can I tell? I suppose so.'

'I have my doubts,' said Lottie, sagely. 'Why should they be? There must be something queer, you know, or why doesn't that stupid old man at Brackenhill treat Percival as the eldest? Well, good night.' And Lottie went off, half-saying, half-singing, 'Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the Sparrow—with my bow and arrow.' And with a triumphant outburst of 'I killed Cock Robin!' she banged the door after her.

There was a pause. Then Addie said, 'Seventeen to-morrow! Mamma, Lottie really is grown up now.'

'Is she?' Mrs. Blake replied doubtfully. 'Time she should be, I'm sure!'

Lottie had been a sore trial to her mother. Addie was pretty as a child, tolerably presentable even at her most awkward age, glided gradually into girlhood and beauty, and finally 'came out' completely to Mrs. Blake's satisfaction. But Lottie at fifteen or sixteen was her despair—'exactly like a great unruly boy,' she lamented. She dashed through her lessons fairly well, but the moment she was released she was unendurable. She whistled, she sang at the top of her voice, and plunged about the house in her thick boots, till she could be off to join the two boys at the Rectory, her dear friends and comrades. Robin Wingfield, the elder, was her junior by rather more than a year; and this advantage, especially as she was tall and strong for her age, enabled her fully to hold her own with them. Nor could Mrs. Blake hinder this friendship, as she would gladly have done, for her husband was on Lottie's side.

'Let the girl alone,' he said. 'Too big for this sort of thing? Rubbish! The milliner's bills will come in quite soon enough. And what's amiss with Robin and Jack? Good boys as boys go, and she's another, and if they like to scramble over hedges and ditches together—let them. For

heaven's sake, Caroline, don't attempt to keep her at home—she'll certainly drive me crazy if you do. No one ever banged doors as Lottie does—she ought to patent the process. Slams them with a crash which jars the whole house, and yet manages not to latch them, and the moment she is gone they are swinging backwards and forwards till I'm almost out of my senses. Here she comes downstairs, like a thunderbolt. Lottie, my dear girl, I'm sure it's going to be fine; better run out and look up those Wingfield boys, I think.'

So the trio spent long half-holidays rambling in the fields; and on these occasions Lottie might be met, an immense distance from home, in the shabbiest clothes, and wearing a red cap of Robin's tossed carelessly on her dark hair. Percival once encountered them on one of these expeditions. Lottie's beauty was still pale and unripe, like those sheathed buds which will come suddenly to their glory of blossom, not like rosebuds which have a loveliness of their own; but the young man was struck by the boyish mixture of shyness and bluntness with which she greeted him, and attracted by the great eyes which gazed at him from under Robin's shabby cap. When he and Horace

went to the Blakes' he amused himself idly enough with the schoolgirl, while his cousin flirted with Addie. He laughed one day when Mrs. Blake was unusually troubled about Lottie's apparel, and said something about 'a sweet neglect.' But the soul of Lottie's mamma was not to be comforted with scraps of poetry. How could it be, when she had just arraigned her daughter on the charge of having her pockets bulging hideously, and had discovered that those receptacles overflowed with a miscellaneous assortment of odds and ends, the accumulations of weeks, tending to show that Lottie and Cock Robin, as she called him, had all things in common? How could it be, when Lottie was always outgrowing her garments in the most ungainly manner, so that her sleeves seemed to retreat in horror from her wrists and from her long hands, tanned by sun and wind, seamed with bramble-scratches, and smeared with schoolroom ink? Once Lottie came home with an unmistakable black eye, for which Robin's cricket-ball was accountable. Then, indeed, Mrs. Blake felt that her cup of bitterness was full to overflowing, though Lottie did assure her, 'You should have seen Jack's eye last April; his was much more swollen, and all sorts of

colours, than mine.' It was impossible to avoid the conclusion that Jack must have been, to say the least of it, unpleasant to look at. Percival happened to come to the house just then, and was tranquilly amused at the good lady's despair. It was before the Blakes knew much of Horace, and she had not yet discovered that Percival's cousin was so much more friendly than Percival himself, so she made the latter her confidant. He recommended a raw beefsteak with a gravity worthy of a Spanish grandee. He was not allowed to see Lottie, who was kept in seclusion as being half-culprit, half-invalid, and wholly unpresentable; but as he was going away the servant gave him a little note in Lottie's boyish scrawl:—

'Dear Percival—Mamma was cross with Robin and sent him away do tell him I'm all right, and he is not to mind he will sure to be about somewhere. It is very stupid being shut up here Addie says she can't go running about giving messages to boys and Papa said if he saw him he should certainly punch his head so please tell him he is not to bother himself about me I shall soon be all right.'

Percival went away, smiling a little at his letter, and at Lottie herself. Just as he

reached the first of the fields which were the short cut from the house, he spied Robin lurking on the other side of the hedge, with Jack at his heels. He halted, and called ‘Robin! Robin Wingfield! I want to speak to you.’

The boy hesitated. ‘There’s a gate farther on.’

Coming to the gate, Percival rested his arms on it, and looked at Robin. The boy was not big for his age, but there was a good deal of cleverness in his upturned freckled face.

‘I’ve a message for you,’ said the young man.

‘From her?’ Robin indicated the Blakes’ house with a jerk of his head.

‘Yes. She asked me to tell you that she is all right, though, of course, she can’t come out at present. She made sure I should find you somewhere about.’

Robin nodded. ‘I did try to hear how she was; but that old dragon——’

‘Meaning my friend Mrs. Blake?’ said young Thorne. ‘Ah! Hardly civil, perhaps—but forcible.’

‘Well—Mrs. Blake then—caught me in the shrubbery, and pitched into me. Said I ought to be ashamed of myself. Supposed I should be satisfied when I’d broken Lottie’s

neck. Told me I'd better not show my face there again.'

'Well,' said Percival, 'you couldn't expect Mrs. Blake to be particularly delighted with your afternoon's work. And, Wingfield, though I was especially to tell you that you were not to vex yourself about it, you really ought to be more careful. Knocking a young lady's eye half out——'

'Young lady!' in a tone of intense scorn.
'Lottie isn't a *young lady*.'

'Oh! isn't she?' said Percival.

'I should think not, indeed!' And Robin eyed the big young man who was laughing at him, as if he meditated wiping out the insult to Lottie then and there. But even with Jack, his sturdy satellite, to help, it was not to be thought of. 'She's a brick!' said Cock Robin, half to himself.

'No doubt,' said Percival. 'But, as I was saying, it isn't exactly the way to treat her. At least—I don't know; upon my word, I don't know,' he soliloquised. 'Judging by most women's novels, from *Jane Eyre* downwards, the taste for muscular bullies prevails. Robin may be the coming hero—who knows?—and courtship commencing with a black eye the future fashion. Well, Robin, any answer?'

‘Tell her I hope she’ll soon be all right. Shall you see her?’

‘I can see that she gets any message you want to send.’

Robin groped among his treasures. ‘Look here; I brought away her knife that afternoon. She lent it me. She’d better have it; it’s got four blades; she may want it, perhaps.’

Percival dropped the formidable instrument carelessly into his pocket. ‘She shall have it. And, Robin, you’d better not be hanging about here—Lottie says so. You’ll only vex Mrs. Blake.’

‘All right,’ said the boy; and went off with Jack after him.

Percival, who was staying in the neighbourhood, went straight home, tied up a parcel of books he thought might amuse Lottie in her imprisonment, and wrote a note to go with them. He was whistling softly to himself as he wrote, and, if the truth be told, had a fair vision floating before his eyes—a girl of whom Lottie had reminded him by sheer force of contrast. Still he liked Lottie in her way. He was young enough to enjoy the easy sense of patronage and superiority which made the words flow so pleasantly from his pen. Never had Lottie seemed to

him so utterly a child as immediately after his talk with her boy friend.

'Here are some books,' said the hurrying pen, 'which I think you will like, if your eye is not so bad as to prevent your reading. Robin was keeping his disconsolate watch close by, as you foretold, and asked anxiously after you, so I gave him your message and dismissed him. He especially charged me to send you the enclosed—knife I believe he called it; it looks to me like a whole armoury of deadly weapons—which he seemed to think would be a comfort to you in your affliction. I sincerely hope it may prove so. I was very civil to him, remembering that I was your ambassador; but if he isn't a little less rough with you in future, I shall be tempted to adopt Mr. Blake's plan if I happen to meet your friend again. You really mustn't let him damage those eyes of yours in this reckless fashion. Mrs. Blake was nearly heart-broken this morning.'

He sent his parcel off, and speedily ceased to think of it. And Lottie herself might have done the same, not caring much for his books, but for four little words—'those eyes of yours.' Had Percival written 'your eyes,' it would have meant nothing; but 'those eyes of yours' implied notice, nay, admiration.

Again and again she looked at the thick paper with the crest at the top, and the vigorous lines of writing below; and again and again the four words, 'those eyes of yours,' seemed to spring into ever clearer prominence. She hid the letter away with a sudden comprehension of the roughness of her pencil scrawl which it answered, and began to take pride in her looks when they least deserved it. Only a day or two before she had envied Robin the possession of sight a little keener than her own; but now she smiled to think that Percival Thorne would never have regretted injury to 'those eyes of yours,' had she owned Robin's light grey orbs.

Her transformation had begun. The knife was still a treasure, but she was ashamed of her delight in it. She breathed on the shining blades, and rubbed them to brightness again; but she did it stealthily, with a glance over her shoulder first. She went rambling with Robin and Jack, but not when she knew that Percival Thorne was in the neighbourhood. She was very sure of his absence on the November day, to which her mother had alluded, when she had insisted on playing trap-and-ball, in the Rectory meadows. Mrs. Blake did not realise it, but it was almost the

last day of Lottie's old life. At Christmas time they were asked to stay for a few days at a friend's house. There was to be a dance; and the hostess, being Lottie's godmother, pointedly included her in the invitation, so Mrs. Blake and Addie did what they could to improve their black sheep's appearance.

Lottie, dressed for the eventful evening, was left alone for a moment before the three went down. She felt shy, dispirited, and sullen. Her ball dress encumbered and constrained her. 'I hate it all,' she said to herself, beating impatiently with her foot upon the ground. Something moving caught her eye; it was her reflection in a mirror. She paused and gazed in wonder. Was this slender girl, arrayed in a cloud of semi-transparent white, really herself—the Lottie who only a few days before had raced Robin Wingfield home across the fields, had been the first over the gap and through the ditch into the Rectory meadow, and had rushed away with the November rain-drops driving in her face? She gazed on; the transformation had its charms after all. But the shadow came back.

'It's no use—Addie's prettier than I ever shall be—I must be second all my life. Second! If I can't be A 1, I'd as soon be

Z 1,000! I won't go about to be a foil to her. I'd ten times rather race with Robin; and I will, too! They shan't coop me up, and make a young lady of me!

She caught the flash of her indignant glance in the glass, and paused.

'Those eyes of yours!'

Must she be second all her life? Had she not a power and witchery of her own? Might she not even distance Addie in the race? 'I've more brains than she has,' mused Lottie.

Her heart was beating fast as they came downstairs. They had only arrived by a late train, which gave them just time to dress; and Mrs. Blake had rather exceeded the allowance, so that most of the guests had arrived, and the first quadrille was nearly ended as they came in. Lottie followed her mother and Addie as they glided through the crowd; and when they paused she stood, shy and fierce, casting lowering glances around. She heard their hostess say to some one—

'Do let me find you a partner.'

A well-known voice replied, 'Not this time, thank you, I'm going to try to find one for myself'; and Percival stood before her, looking, to her girlish fancy, more of a hero than ever in the evening dress which became

him well. The perfectly-fitting gloves, the flower in his coat, a dozen little things which she could not define, made her feel uncouth and anxious, fascinated and frightened, all at once. Had he greeted her in the patronising way in which he had talked to her of old, she would have been deeply wounded ; but he asked her for the next dance more ceremoniously, she knew, than Horace would have asked Addie. Still she trembled as they moved off. They had scarcely met since her note to him. Suppose he alluded to it, asked after her black eye, and inquired whether she had derived any benefit from the beefsteak ! Nothing more natural, and yet if he did Lottie felt that she should *hate* him. 'I know I should do something dreadful,' she thought ; 'scratch his face, and then burst out crying most likely. Oh, what would become of me ! I should be ruined for life ! I should have to shut myself up, never see anyone again, and emigrate with Robin directly he was old enough.'

Percival did not know his danger, but he escaped it. The fatal thoughts were in his mind while Lottie was planning her disgrace and exile ; but he merely remarked that he liked the first waltz, and should they start at once, or wait a moment till a couple or two dropped out ?

‘I don’t know whether I *can* waltz,’ said Lottie doubtfully.

‘Weren’t you ever tortured with dancing lessons?’

‘Oh, yes! But I’ve never tried at a party. Suppose we go bumping up against everybody, like that fat man and the little lady in pink—the two who are just stopping.’

‘I assure you,’ said Percival gravely, ‘that I do not dance at all like that fat man. And if you dance like the lady in pink, I shall be more surprised than I have words to say. Now?’

They were off. Percival knew that he waltzed well, and had an idea that Lottie would prove a good partner. Nor was he mistaken. She had been fairly taught, much against her will, had a good ear for time, and, thanks to many a race with Robin Wingfield, her energy was almost terrible. They spun swiftly and silently round, unwearied while other couples dropped out of the ranks to rest and talk. Percival was well pleased. It is true that he had memories of waltzes with Sissy Langton, of more utter harmony, of sweeter grace, of delight more perfect, though far more fleeting. But Lottie, with her steady swiftness and her strong young life, had a charm of her own which he was not slow to

recognise. She would hardly have thanked him for accurately classifying it, for, as she danced, she felt that she had discovered a new joy. Her old life slipped from her like a husk. Friendship with Cock Robin was an evident absurdity. It is true she was angry with herself that, after fighting so passionately for freedom, she should voluntarily bend her proud neck beneath the yoke. She foresaw that her mother and Addie would triumph, she felt that her bondage to Mrs. Grundy would often be irksome; but here was the first instalment of her wages in this long waltz with Percival. She fancied that the secret of her pleasure lay in the two words, 'with Percival.' In her ignorance she thought that she was tasting the honeyed fire of love, when, in truth, it was the sweetness of conscious success. Before the last notes of that enchanted music died away, she had cast her girlish devotion, 'half in a rapture and half in a rage,' at her partner's feet, while he stood beside her calm and self-possessed. He would have been astounded, and perhaps almost disgusted, had he known what was passing through her mind.

Love at sixteen is generally only a desire to be in love, and seeks not so much a fit as a possible object. Probably Lottie's passion

offered as many assurances of domestic bliss as could be desired at her age.

Percival was dark, foreign-looking, and handsome; he had an interesting air of reserve, and no apparent need to practise small economies. His clothes fitted him extremely well; and at times he had a way of standing proudly aloof, which was worthy of any hero of romance. No settled occupation would interfere with picnics and balls; and, to crown all, had he not said to her, 'Those eyes of yours?' Were not these ample foundations for the happiness of thirty or forty years of marriage?

Percival, meanwhile, wanted to be kind to the childish, half-tamed Lottie, who had attracted his notice in the fields, and trusted him with her generous message to Robin Wingfield. The girl fancied herself immensely improved by her white dress; but, had Thorne been a painter, he would have sketched her as a pale vision of Liberty, with loosely-knotted hair, and dark eyes glowing under Robin's red cap. He was able coolly to determine the precise nature of his pleasure in her society, but he knew that it was a pleasure. And Lottie, when she fell asleep that night, clasped a card which was rendered priceless by the frequent recurrence of his initials.

Her passion transformed her. Her vehement spirit remained, but everything else was changed. Her old dreams and longings were cast out by the new. She laughed with Mrs. Blake and Addie; but under the laughter she hid her love, and cherished it in fierce and solitary silence. Yet even to herself the transformation seemed so wonderful that she could hardly believe in it, and acted the rough girl now and then with the idea that otherwise they *must* think her a consummate actress, morning, noon, and night. For some months no great event marked the record of her unsuspected passion. It might, perhaps, have run its course, and died out harmlessly in due time, but for an unlucky afternoon, about a week before her birthday, when Percival uttered some thoughtless words which woke a tempest of doubt and fear in Lottie's heart. She did not question his love; but she caught a glimpse of his pride, and felt as if a gulf had opened between her and her dream of happiness.

Percival was calling at the house on the eventful day which was destined to influence Lottie's fate and his own. He was in a happy mood, well pleased with things in general, and, after his own fashion, inclined

to be talkative. When visitors arrived, and Addie exclaimed 'Mrs. Pickering and that boy of hers—Oh, bother!' she spoke the feelings of the whole party; and Percival, from his place by the window, looked across at Lottie and shrugged his shoulders expressively. Had there been time he would have tried to escape into the garden with his girl friend; but, as that was impossible, he resigned himself to his fate and listened while Mrs. Pickering poured forth her rapture, concerning her son's prospects, to Mrs. Blake. An uncle, who was the head of a great London firm, had offered the young man a situation, with an implied promise of a share in the business later. 'Such a subject for congratulation!' the good lady exclaimed, beaming on her son, who sat silently turning his hat in his hands, and looking very pink. 'Such an opening for William! Better than having a fortune left him, I call it, for it is such a thing to have an occupation. Every young man should be brought up to something, in my opinion.'

Mrs. Blake, with a half-glance at Addie and a thought of Horace, suggested that heirs to landed estates——

'Well, yes.' Mrs. Pickering agreed with her. Country gentlemen often found so

much to do in looking after their tenants, and making improvements, that she would not say anything about them. But young men with small incomes and no profession—she should be sorry if a son of hers——

'Like me, for instance,' said Percival, looking up. 'I've a small income, and no profession.'

Mrs. Pickering, somewhat confused, hastened to explain that she meant nothing personal.

'Of course not,' he said; 'I know that. I only mentioned it because I think an illustration stamps a thing on people's memories.'

'But, Percival,' Mrs. Blake interposed, 'I must say that in this I agree with Mrs. Pickering. I do think it would be better if you had something to do—I do indeed.' She looked at him with an air of affectionate severity. 'I speak as your friend, you know.' (Percival bowed his gratitude.) 'I really think young people are happier when they have a settled occupation.'

'I dare say that is true, as a rule,' he said.

'But you don't think you would be?' questioned Lottie.

He turned to her with a smile. 'Well, I doubt it. Of course I don't know how

happy I might be if I had been brought up to a profession.’ He glanced through the open window at the warm loveliness of June. ‘At this moment, for instance, I might have been writing a sermon, or cutting off a man’s leg. But, somehow, I am very well satisfied as I am.’

‘Oh! if you mean to make fun of it——’ Mrs. Blake began.

‘But I don’t,’ Percival said quickly. ‘I may laugh, but I’m in earnest too. I have plenty to eat and drink—I can pay my tailor, and still have a little money in my pocket—I am my own master. Sometimes I ride—another man’s horse—if not I walk, and am just as well content. I don’t smoke—I don’t bet—I have no expensive tastes. What could money do for me that I should spend the best years of my life in slaving for it?’

‘That may be all very well for the present,’ said Mrs. Blake.

‘Why not for the future too? Oh, I have my dream for the future too.’

‘And pray, may one ask what it is?’ said Mrs. Pickering, looking down on him from the height of William’s prosperity.

‘Certainly,’ he said. ‘Some day I shall leave England, and travel leisurely about the

Continent. I shall have a sky over my head, compared with which this blue is misty and pale. I shall gain new ideas. I shall get grapes, and figs, and melons very cheap. There will be a little too much garlic in my daily life—even such a destiny as mine must have its drawbacks—but think of the wonderful scenery I shall see, and the queer beautiful out-of-the-way holes and corners I shall discover! And in years to come I shall rejoice, without envy, to hear that Mr. Blake has bought a large estate, and gains prizes for fat cattle, while my friend here has been knighted on the occasion of some City demonstration.'

Young Pickering, who had been listening open-mouthed to the other's fluent and tranquil speech, reddened at the allusion to himself, and dropped his hat.

'At that rate you must never marry,' said Mrs. Blake.

Percival thoughtfully stroked his lip. 'You think I should not find a wife to share my enjoyment of a small income?'

'Marry a girl with lots of money, Mr. Thorne,' said the future Sir William, feeling it incumbent on him to take part in the conversation.

'Not I!' Percival's glance made the

lad's hot face yet hotter. ‘That's the last thing I will do. If a man means to work he may marry whom he will. But if he has made up his mind to be idle he is a contemptible cur if he will let his wife keep him in his idleness.’ He spoke very quietly in his soft voice, and leaned back in his chair.

‘Well, then, you must never fall in love with an heiress,’ said Mrs. Blake.

‘Or you must work and win her,’ Lottie suggested almost in a whisper.

He smiled, but slightly shook his head, with a look which she fancied meant ‘Too late.’ Mrs. Pickering began to tell the latest Fordborough scandal, and the talk drifted into another channel.

Lottie had listened as she always listened when Percival spoke, but she had not attached any peculiar meaning to his words. But an hour or so later, when he was gone, and she was loitering in the garden just outside the window, Addie, who was within, made some remark in a laughing tone. Lottie did not catch the words, but Mrs. Blake's reply was distinct and not to be mistaken, ‘William Pickering indeed! No, with your looks and your expectations you girls ought to marry really well.’ Lottie

stood aghast. They would have money, then! She had never thought about money. She would be an heiress? And Percival would never marry an heiress—he could not—had he not said so? How gladly would she have given him every farthing she possessed! And was her fortune to be a barrier between them for ever? Every syllable that he had spoken was made clear by this revelation, and rose up before her eyes as a terrible word of doom. But she was not one to be easily dismayed, and her first cry was, 'What shall I do?' Lottie's thoughts turned always to action, not to endurance, and she was resolved to break down the barrier, let the cost be what it might. Her talk with Godfrey Hammond gave a new interest to her romance, and new strength to her determination. Since her hero was disinherited and poor, and she, though rich, would be poor in all she cared to have if she were parted from him, might she not tell him so, when she saw him on her birthday? She thought it would be easier to speak on the one day when in girlish fashion she would be queen. She would not think of her own pride because his pride was dear to her. She could not tell what she would say or do—she only knew that her

birthday should decide her fate. And her heart was beating fast in hope and fear the night before, when she banged the door after her, and went off to bed, sublimely ready to renounce the world for Percival.

CHAPTER III.

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES—ALFRED THORNE'S
IS TOLD BY THE WRITER.

MR. THORNE, of Brackenhill, was a miserable man, who went through the world with a morbidly sensitive spot in his nature. A touch on it was torture, and unfortunately the circumstances of his daily life continually chafed it.

It was only a common form of selfishness carried to excess. 'I don't want much,' he would have said, truly enough, for Godfrey Thorne had never been grasping, 'but let it be my own.' He could not enjoy anything, unless he knew that he might waste it if he liked. The highest good, fettered by any condition, was in his eyes no good at all. Brackenhill was dear to him because he could leave it to whom he would. He was seventy-six, and had spent his life in improving his estate; but he prized

nothing about it so much as his right to give the result of his life's work to the first beggar he might chance to meet. It would have made him still happier if he could have had the power of destroying Brackenhill utterly, of wiping it off the face of the earth, in case he could not find an heir who pleased him, for it troubled him to think that some man *must* have the land after him, whether he wished it or not.

Godfrey Hammond had declared that no one could conceive the exquisite torments Mr. Thorne would endure if he owned an estate with a magnificent ruin on it, some unique and priceless relic of bygone days. 'He should be able to see it from his window,' said Hammond, 'and it should be his, as far as law could make it, while he should be continually conscious that in the eyes of all cultivated men he was merely its guardian. People should write to the newspapers, asserting boldly that the public had a right of free access to it, and old gentlemen with antiquarian tastes should find a little gap in a fence, and pen indignant appeals to the editor, demanding to be immediately informed whether a monument of national, nay, of world-wide interest, ought not for the sake of the public, to be more carefully

protected from injury. Local archæological societies should come and read papers in it. Clergymen, wishing to combine a little instruction with the pleasures of a school-feast, should arrive with van-loads of cheering boys and girls, a troop of ardent teachers, many calico flags, and a brass band. Artists, keen-eyed and picturesque, each with his good-humoured air of possessing the place so much more truly than any mere country gentleman ever could, should come to gaze and sketch. Meanwhile Thorne should remark about twice a week, that of course he could pull the whole thing down if he liked ; to which everyone should smile assent, recognising an evident but utterly unimportant fact. And then,' said Hammond solemnly, 'when all the archæologists were eating and drinking, enjoying their own theories, and picking holes in their neighbours' discoveries, the bolt should fall in the shape of an announcement that Mr. Thorne had sold the stones as building materials, and that the workmen had already removed the most ancient and interesting part. After which he would go slowly to his grave, dying of his triumph and broken heart.'

It was all quite true, though Godfrey Hammond might have added that all the

execrations of the antiquarians would hardly have added to the burden of shame and remorse of which Mr. Thorne would have felt the weight before the last cart carried away its load from the trampled sward ; that he would have regretted his decision every hour of his life ; and if by a miracle he could have found himself once more with the fatal deed undone, he would have rejoiced for a moment, suffered his old torment for a little while, and then proceeded to do it again.

For a great part of Mr. Thorne's life the boast of his power over Brackenhill had been on his lips more frequently than the twice a week of which Hammond talked. Of late years it had not been so. He had used his power to assure himself that he possessed it, and gradually awoke to the consciousness that he had lost it by thus using it.

He had had three sons—Maurice, a fine, high-spirited young fellow ; Alfred, good-looking and good-tempered, but indolent ; James, a slim, sickly lad, who inherited from his mother a fatal tendency to decline. She died while he was a baby, and he was petted from that time forward. Godfrey Thorne was well satisfied with Maurice ; but was always at war with his second son, who would not take orders and hold the family

living. They argued the matter till it was too late for Alfred to go into the army, the only career for which he had expressed any desire; and then Mr. Thorne found himself face to face with a gentle and lazy resistance, which threatened to be a match for his own hard obstinacy. Alfred didn't mind being a farmer. But his father was troubled about the necessary capital, and doubted his son's success. 'You will go on after a fashion for a few years, and then all the money will have slipped through your fingers. You know nothing of farming.' 'That's true,' said Alfred. 'And you are much too lazy to learn.' 'That's very likely,' said the young man. So Mr. Thorne looked about him for some more eligible opening for his troublesome son; and Alfred meanwhile, with his handsome face and honest smile, was busy making love to Sarah Percival, the Rector's daughter.

The little idyll was the talk of the villagers before it came to the Squire's ears. When he questioned Alfred, the young man confessed it readily enough. He loved Miss Percival, and she didn't mind waiting. Mr. Thorne was not altogether displeased; for, though his intercourse with the Rector was rather stormy and uncertain, they happened

to be on tolerable terms just then. Sarah was an only child, and would have a little money at Mr. Percival's death, and Alfred was much more submissive and anxious to please his father under these altered circumstances. The young people were not to consider themselves engaged, Miss Percival being only eighteen and Alfred one-and-twenty. But if they were of the same mind later, when the latter should be in a position to marry, it was understood that neither his father nor Mr. Percival would oppose it.

Unluckily a parochial question arose near Christmas time, and the Squire and the clergyman took different views of it. Mr. Thorne went about the house with brows like a thunder-cloud, and never opened his lips to Alfred except to abuse the Rector. 'You'll have to choose between old Percival and me one of these days,' he said more than once. 'You'd better be making up your mind—it will save time.' Alfred was silent. When the strife was at its height, Maurice was drowned while skating.

The poor fellow was hardly in his grave before the storm burst on Alfred's head. If Mr. Thorne had barely tolerated the idea of his son's marriage before, he found it utterly

intolerable now; and the decree went forth that this boyish folly about Miss Percival must be forgotten. 'I can do as I like with Brackenhill,' said Mr. Thorne; 'remember that!' Alfred did remember it. He had heard it often enough, and his father's angry eyes gave it an added emphasis. 'I can make an eldest son of James if I like, and I will if you defy me.' But nothing could shake Alfred. He had given his word to Miss Percival, and they loved each other, and he meant to keep to it. 'You don't believe me!' his father thundered; 'you think I may talk, but that I shan't do it. Take care!' There was no trace of any conflict on Alfred's face; he looked a little dull and heavy under the bitter storm, but that was all. 'I can't help it, sir,' he said, tracing the pattern of the carpet with the toe of his boot as he stood; 'you will do as you please, I suppose.' 'I suppose I shall,' said Mr. Thorne.

So Alfred was disinherited. 'As well for this as anything else,' he said; 'we couldn't have got on long.' He had an allowance from his father, who declined to take any further interest in his plans. He went abroad for a couple of years—a test which Mr. Percival imposed upon him, that nothing

might be done in haste; and came back, faithful as he went, to ask for the consent which could no longer be denied. Mr. Percival had been presented to a living at some distance from Brackenhill, and, as there was a good deal of glebe land attached to it, Alfred was able to try his hand at farming. He did so, with little loss if no gain, and they made one household at the Rectory.

He never seemed to regret Brackenhill. Sarah—dark, ardent, intense—a strange contrast to his own fair, handsome face and placid indolence—absorbed all his love. Her eager nature could not rouse him to battle with the world, but it woke a passionate devotion in his heart; they were everything to each other, and were content. When their boy was born the Rector would have named him Godfrey; at any rate he urged them to call him by one of the old family names which had been borne by bygone generations of Thornes. But the young husband was resolved that the child should be Percival, and Percival only. ‘Why prejudice his grandfather against him for a mere name?’ the Rector persisted. But Alfred shook his head: ‘Percival means all the happiness of my life,’ he said. So the child received his name, and the fact was

announced to Mr. Thorne in a letter, brief and to the point like a challenge.

Communications with Brackenhill were few and far between. From the local papers Alfred heard of the rejoicings when James came of age, quickly followed by the announcement that he had gone abroad for the winter. Then he was at home again, and going to marry Miss Harriet Benham; whereat Alfred smiled a little. 'The governor must have put his pride in his pocket; old Benham made his money out of composite candles, then retired, and has gas all over the house for fear they should be mentioned. Harry, as we used to call her, is the youngest of them—she must be eight or nine and twenty; fine girl—hunts; tried it on with poor Maurice ages ago. I should think she was about half as big again as Jim—well, yes! perhaps I am exaggerating a little. How charmed my father must be!—only, of course, anything to please Jim, and it's a fine thing to have him married and settled.'

Alfred read his father's feelings correctly enough; but Mr. Thorne was almost repaid for all he had endured when, in his turn, he was able to write and announce the birth of a boy, for whom the bells had been set ringing as

the heir of Brackenhill. Jim, with his sick fancies and querulous conceit ; Mrs. James Thorne, with her coarsely-coloured splendour and imperious ways, faded into the background now that Horace's little star had risen.

The rest may be briefly told. Horace had a little sister who died, and he himself could hardly remember his father. His time was divided between his mother's house at Brighton and Brackenhill. He grew slim, and tall, and handsome—a Thorne and not a Benham, as his grandfather did not fail to note. He was delicate. 'But he will out-grow that,' said Mrs. Middleton, and loved him the better for the care she had to take of him. It was principally for his sake that she was there. She was a widow, and had no children of her own ; but when, at her brother's request, she came to Brackenhill to make more of a home for the schoolboy, she brought with her a tiny girl—little Sissy Langton—a great-niece of her husband's.

Meanwhile, the other boy grew up in his quiet home ; but death came there as well as to Brackenhill, and seemed to take the mainspring of the household in taking Sarah Thorne. Her father pined for her, and had no pleasure in life except in her child. Even when the old man was growing feeble, and it

was manifest to all but the boy that he would not long be parted from his daughter, it was a sombre but not an unhappy home for the child. Something in the shadow which overhung it, in his grandfather's weakness and his father's silence, made him grave and reserved ; but he always felt that he was loved. No playful home name was ever bestowed on the little lad ; but it did not matter, for, when spoken by Alfred Thorne, no name could be so tender as Percival.

The Rector's death, when the boy was fifteen, broke up the only real home he was destined to know ; for Alfred was unable to settle down in any place for any length of time. While his wife and her father were alive, their influence over him was supreme : he was like the needle drawn aside by a powerful attraction. But now that they were gone, his thoughts oscillated awhile, and then reverted to Brackenhill. For himself he was content ; he had made his choice long ago ; but little by little the idea grew up in his mind that Percival was wronged, for he, at least, was guiltless. He secretly regretted the defiant fashion in which his boy had been christened, and made a feeble attempt to prove that, after all, Percy

was an old family name. He succeeded in establishing that a 'P. Thorne' had once existed, who, of course, might have been Percy, as he might have been Peter or Paul ; and he tried to call his son Percy, in memory of this doubtful namesake. But the three syllables were as dear to the boy as the White Flag to a Bourbon. They identified him with the mother he dimly remembered, and proclaimed to all the world (that is, to his grandfather) that for her sake he counted Brackenhill well lost. He triumphed, and his father was proud to be defeated. To this day he invariably writes himself 'Percival Thorne.'

Alfred, however, had his way on a more important point, and educated his son for no profession, because the head of the house needed none. Percival acquiesced willingly enough, without a thought of the implied protest. He was indolent, and had little or no ambition. Since daily bread—and, luckily, rather more than daily bread, for he was no ascetic—was secured to him, since books were many, and the world was wide, he asked nothing better than to study them. He grew up grave, dreamy, and somewhat solitary in his ways. He seemed to have inherited something of the Rector's self-

possessed and rather formal courtesy, and at twenty he looked older than his age, though his face was as smooth as a girl's.

He was not twenty-one when his father died suddenly of fever. When the news reached Brackenhill, the old Squire was singularly affected by it. He had been accustomed to contrast Alfred's vigorous prime with his own advanced age, Percival's unbroken health with Horace's ailing boyhood, and to think mournfully of the probability that the old manor-house must go to a stranger unless he could humble himself to the son who had defied him. But, old as he was, he had outlived his son, and he was dismayed at his isolation. A whole generation was dead and gone; and the two lads, who were all that remained of the Thornes of Brackenhill, stood far away, as though he stretched his trembling hands to them across their fathers' graves. He expressly requested that Percival should come and see him, and the young man presented himself in his deep mourning. Sissy, just sixteen, looked upon him as a sombre hero of romance, and, within two days of his coming, Mrs. Middleton announced that her brother was 'perfectly infatuated about that boy.'

The evening of his arrival he stood with

his grandfather on the terrace, looking at the wide prospect which lay at their feet—ample fields and meadows, and the silvery flash of water through the willows. Then he turned, folded his arms, and coolly surveyed Brackenhill itself from end to end. Mr. Thorne watched him, expecting some word; but when none came, and Percival's eyes wandered upwards to the soft evening sky, where a glimmering star hung like a lamp above the old grey manor-house, he said, with some amusement—

‘Well, and what is your opinion?’

Percival came down to earth with the greatest promptitude.

‘It's a beautiful place. I'm glad to see it. I like looking over old houses.’

‘Like looking over old houses? As if it were merely a show! Isn't Brackenhill more to you than any other old house?’ demanded Mr. Thorne.

‘Oh! well, perhaps,’ Percival allowed; ‘I have heard my father talk of it, of course.’

‘Come, come! You are not such an outsider as all that,’ said his grandfather.

The young man smiled a little, but did not speak.

‘You don't forget you are a Thorne, I

hope,' the other went on. 'There are none too many of us.'

'No,' said Percival. 'I like the old house, and I can assure you, sir, that I am proud of both my names.'

'Well, well; very good names. But shouldn't you call a man a lucky fellow if he owned a place like this?'

'My opinion wouldn't be half as well worth having as yours,' was the reply. 'What do you call yourself, sir?'

'Do you think I own this place?' Mr. Thorne inquired.

'Why, yes; I always supposed so. Don't you?'

'No, I don't!' The answer was almost a snarl. 'I'm bailiff, overlooker, anything you like to call it. My master is at Oxford, at Christ Church. He won't read, and he can't row; so he is devoting his time to learning how to get rid of the money I am to save up for him. I own Brackenhill?' He faced abruptly round. 'All that timber is mine, they say. And if I cut down a stick your Aunt Middleton is at me—"think of Horace." The place was mortgaged when I came into it. I pinched and saved—I freed it—for Horace. Why shouldn't I mortgage it again if I please; raise money and live

royally till my time comes—eh? They'd all be at me, dinning "Horace, Horace," and my duty to those who come after me, into my ears. Look at the drawing-room furniture!'

'The prettiest old room I ever saw,' said Percival.

'Ah! you're right there. But my sister doesn't think so. It's shabby, she would tell you. But does she ask me to furnish it for her? No, no, it isn't worth while; mine is such a short lease. When Horace marries and comes into his inheritance, of course it must be done up. It would be a pity to waste money about it now, especially as there's a bit of land lies between two farms of mine, and if I don't go spending a lot in follies, I can buy it—think of that! I can buy it—*for Horace!*'

Percival was guarded in his replies to this and similar outbursts; and Mrs. Middleton, seeing that he showed no disposition to toady his grandfather or to depreciate Horace, told Godfrey Hammond that, though her brother was so absurd about him, she thought he seemed a good sort of young man after all. 'Time will show,' was the answer. Now this was depressing, for Godfrey had established a reputation for great sagacity.

CHAPTER IV.

WISHING WELL AND ILL.

LOTTIE'S birthday had dawned, the fresh morning hours had slipped away, the sun had declined from his mid-day splendour into golden afternoon, and yet to Lottie herself the day seemed scarcely yet begun. Its crowning delight was to be a dance given in her honour, and she awaited that dance with feverish anxiety.

It was nearly three o'clock when the dog-cart from Brackenhill came swiftly along the dusty road. It was nearing its destination; already there were distant glimpses of Fordborough with its white suburban villas. Percival Thorne thoroughly enjoyed the bright June weather, the cloudless blue, the clear singing of the birds, the whisper of the leaves, the universal sweetness from far-off fields and blossoms near at hand. He gazed at the landscape with eyes that seemed to be

looking at something far away, and yet they were observant enough to note a figure crossing a neighbouring field. It was but a momentary vision, and the expression of his face did not vary in the slightest degree, but he turned to the man at his side, and spoke in his leisurely fashion. 'I'll get down here, and walk the rest of the way. You may take my things to Mr. Hardwicke's.'

The man took the reins, but he looked round in some wonder, as if seeking the cause of the order. His curiosity was unsatisfied. The slim girlish figure had vanished behind a clump of trees, and nothing was visible that could in any way account for so sudden a change of purpose. Glancing back as he drove off, he saw only Mr. Percival Thorne, darkly conspicuous on the glaring road, standing where he had alighted, and apparently lost in thought. The roan horse turned a corner, the sound of wheels died away in the distance, and Percival walked a few steps in the direction of Brackenhill, reached a stile, leaned against it, and waited.

'Many happy returns of the day to you!' he said, as the girl, whom he had seen, came along the field-path. Light leafy shadows wavered on her as she walked, and, all un-

conscious of his presence, she was softly whistling an old tune.

The colour rushed to her face, and she stopped short. 'Percival! You here?' she said.

'Yes—did I startle you? I was driving into the town, and saw you in the distance. I could not do less—could I?—than stop then and there to pay my respects to the queen of the day. And what a glorious day it is!'

Lottie sprang over the stile, and looked up and down the road. 'Oh, you are going to walk?' she said.

'I'm going to walk—yes. But what brings you here, wandering about the fields to-day?'

She had recovered her composure, and looked up at him with laughing eyes. 'It is wretched indoors. They are so busy fussing over things for to-night, you know.'

'Exactly what I thought you would be doing too.'

'I? Oh, mamma said I wasn't a bit of use, and Addie said that I was more than enough to drive Job out of his mind. The fact was I upset one of her flower vases. And afterwards—well, afterwards—I broke a big china bowl.'

'I begin to understand,' said Percival

thoughtfully, 'that they might feel able to get on without your help.'

'Yes, perhaps they might. But they needn't have made such a noise about the thing—as if nobody could enjoy the dance to-night because a china bowl was smashed! Such rubbish! What could it matter?'

'Was it something unique?'

'Oh, it was worse than that,' she answered frankly. 'It was one of a set. But I don't see why one can't be just as happy without a complete set of everything.'

'There I agree with you,' he replied. 'I certainly can't say that my happiness is bound up with crockery of any kind. And, do you know, Lottie, I'm rather glad it was one of a set. Otherwise your mother might have known that there was something magical about it, but one of a set is prosaic—isn't it? Suppose it had been a case of

If this glass doth fall,
Farewell, then, O Luck of Edenhall !'

'Well, the luck would have been in uncommonly little bits,' she replied. 'I smashed it on a stone step, and they were so cross that I was crosser; so I said I would come out for a walk.'

'And do you feel any better?' he asked in an anxious voice.

'Yes, thank you. Being in the open air has done me good.'

'Then may I go with you? Or will no thing short of solitude effect a complete cure?'

'You may come,' she said gravely. 'That is, if you are not afraid of the remains of my ill-temper.'

'No—I'm not afraid. I don't make light of your anger, but I believe I'm naturally very brave. Where are we going?'

She hesitated a moment, then looked up at him. 'Percival, isn't this the way to the wishing-well? Ever since we came to Fordborough, three months ago, I've wanted to go there. Do you know where it is?'

'Oh yes, I know it. It is about a mile from here, or perhaps a little more. That won't be too far for you, will it?'

'Too far!' She laughed outright. 'Why, I could walk ten times as far, and dance all night afterwards!'

'Then we'll go,' said Percival. And, crossing the road, they passed into the fields on the opposite side. A pathway, too narrow for two to walk abreast, led them through a wide sea of corn, where the flying breezes were betrayed by delicate tremulous waves. Lottie led the way, putting out her hand from time to time as she went, and brushing

the bloom from the softly swaying wheat. She was silent. Fate had befriended her strangely in this walk. The loneliness of the sunlit fields was far better for her purpose than the crowd and laughter of the evening, but her heart almost failed her, and, with childish superstition, she resolved that she would not speak the words which trembled on her lips until she and Percival should have drunk together of the wishing-well. He followed her, silent too. He was well satisfied to be with his beautiful school-girl friend, free to speak or hold his peace as he chose. Freedom was the great charm of his friendship with Lottie—freedom from restraint and responsibility. For if Percival was serenely happy and assured on any single point, he was so with regard to his perfect comprehension of the Blakes in general, and Lottie in particular. He had some idea of giving his cousin Horace a word of warning on the subject of Mrs. Blake's designs. He quite understood that good lady's feelings concerning himself. 'I'm nobody,' he thought. 'I'm not to be thrown over because I introduced Horace to them; besides, I'm an additional link between Fordborough and Brackenhill, and Mrs. Blake would give her ears to know Aunt Middleton. And I am

no trouble so long as I am satisfied to amuse myself with Lottie. In fact, I am rather useful. I keep the child out of mischief, and I don't give her black eyes as that Wingfield boy did.' And from this point Percival would glide into vague speculation as to Lottie's future. He was inclined to think that the girl would do something, and be something—when she grew up. She was vehement, resolute, ambitious. He wondered idly, and a little sentimentally, whether hereafter, when their paths had diverged for ever, she would look back kindly to these tranquil days, and her old friend Percival. He rather thought not. She would have enough to occupy her without that.

It was true, after a fashion, that Lottie was ambitious in her dreams of love. Her lover must be heroic, handsome, a gentleman by birth, with something of romance about his story. A noble poverty might be more fascinating than wealth. There was but one thing absolutely needful—he must not be commonplace. It was the towering yet unsubstantial ambition of her age, a vision of impossible splendour and happiness. Most girls have such dreams; most women find at six or seven and twenty that their enchanted castles in the air have shrunk to

brick and mortar houses. Tastes change, and they might even be somewhat embarrassed were they called on to play their parts in the passionate love-poems which they dreamed at seventeen. But the world was just opening before Lottie's eyes, and she was ready to be a heroine of romance.

'This way,' said Percival, and they turned into a narrow lane, deep and cool, with green banks overgrown with ferns, and arching boughs above. As they strolled along he gathered pale honeysuckle blossoms from the hedge, and gave them to Lottie. 'How pretty it is!' said the girl, looking round.

'Wait till you see the well,' he replied. 'We shall be there directly—it is prettier there.'

'But this is pretty too—why should I wait?' said Lottie.

'You are right. I don't know why you should. Admire both; you are wiser than I, Lottie.'

As he spoke the lane widened into a grassy glade, and Lottie quickened her steps, uttering a cry of pleasure. Percival followed her, with a smile on his lips. 'Here is your wishing-well,' he said. 'Do you like it, now that you have found it out?'

She might well have been satisfied, even

if she had been harder to please. It was a spring of the fairest water, bubbling into a tiny hollow. The little pool was like a brimming cup, with coloured pebbles, and dancing sand at the bottom, and delicate leaf-sprays clustered lightly round its rim. And this gem of sparkling water was set in a space of mossy sward, with trees which leant and whispered overhead, their quivering canopy pierced here and there by golden shafts of sunlight, and glimpses of far-off blue.

'It is like fairy-land,' said Lottie.

'Or like something in Keats' poems,' Percival suggested.

'I never read a line of them, so I can't say,' she answered with defiant candour, while she inwardly resolved to get the book.

He smiled. 'You don't read much poetry yet, do you? Ah, well, you have time enough. How about wishing, now we are here?' he went on, stooping to look into the well. 'Your wishes ought to have a double virtue on your birthday.'

'I only hope they may.'

'What—have you decided on something very important? Seventeen-to-day! Lottie, don't wish to be eighteen—that will come much too soon without wishing.'

'I don't want to be eighteen. I think

seventeen is old enough,' she answered dreamily.

'So do I.' He was thinking, as he spoke, what a charming childish age it was, and how, before he knew Lottie, he had fancied, from books, that girls were grown-up at seventeen.

'Now I am going to wish,' she said, seriously, 'and you must wish after me.' Bending over the pool, she looked earnestly into it, took water in the hollow of her hand, and drank. Then, standing back, she made a sign to her companion. He stepped forward, and saying, with a bright glance, 'My wishes must be for you to-day, Queen Lottie,' he followed her example. But when he looked up, shaking the cold drops from his hand, he was struck by the intense expression on her downward-bent face. 'What has the child been wishing?' he wondered, and an idea flashed suddenly into his mind which almost made him smile. 'By Jove!' he said to himself, 'there will be a fiery passion one of these fine days—when Lottie falls in love!' But even as he thought this the look which had startled him was gone. 'We needn't go back directly, need we?' she said. 'Let us rest a little while.'

'By all means,' Percival replied. 'I'm quite ready to rest as long as you like—I

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consider resting my strong point. What do you say to this bank? Or there is a fallen tree just across there——'

'No—Percival, listen! There are some horrid people coming—let us go on a little further, out of their way.'

He listened. 'Yes, there are some people coming. Very likely they are horrid—though we have no fact to go upon, except their desire to find the wishing-well—at any rate, we don't want them. Lottie, you are right—let us fly!'

They escaped from the glade at the further end, passed through a gate into a field, and found themselves once more in the broad sunlight. They paused for a moment, dazzled, and uncertain which way to go. '*Why* did those people come and turn us out?' said Thorne, regretfully. A shrill scream of laughter rang through the shade which they had just left. 'What shall we do now?'

'I don't mind; I like this sunshine,' said Lottie. 'Percival, don't you think there would be a view up there?'

'Up there' was a grassy little eminence which rose rather abruptly in the midst of the neighbouring fields. It was parted from the place where they stood by a couple of meadows.

'I should think there might be.'

‘Then let us go there. When I see a hill I always feel as if I must get to the top of it.’

‘I’ve no objection to that feeling in the present case, as the hill happens to be a very little one,’ Percival replied. ‘And the shepherds and shepherdesses in our Arcadia are unpleasantly noisy. But I don’t see any gate into the next field.’

‘Who wants a gate? There’s a gap by that old stump.’

‘And you don’t mind this ditch? It isn’t very wide,’ he said, as he stood on the bank.

‘No, I don’t mind it.’ He held out his hand; she laid hers on it, and sprang lightly across, with a word of thanks. A few months earlier she would have scorned Cock Robin’s assistance had the ditch been twice as wide, as that day she would have scorned any assistance but Percival’s. It was well that she did not need help, for his outstretched hand, firm as it was, gave her little. It rather sent a tremulous thrill through her as she touched it, that was more likely to make her falter than succeed. She was not vexed that he relapsed into silence as they went on their way. In her eyes his aspect was darkly thoughtful and heroic. As she walked by his side the low grass fields became enchanted meads, and

the poor little flowers bloomed like poets' asphodel. A lark sang overhead as never bird sang before, and the breeze was sweet with memories of blossom. When they stood on the summit of the little hill, the view was fair as Paradise. A big grey stone lay among the tufts of bracken, as if a giant hand had tossed it there in sport. Lottie sat down, leaning against it, and Percival threw himself on the grass at her feet.

She was nerving herself to overcome an unwonted feeling of timidity. She had dreamed of this birthday with childish eagerness. Her fancy had made it the portal of a world of unknown delights. She grew sick with fear, lest through her weakness, or any mischance, the golden hours should glide by, and no golden joy be secured before the night came on. Golden hours—were they not rather golden moments on the hillside with Percival? He loved her, she was sure of that; but he was poor, and would never speak. What could she say to him? She bent forward a little that she might see him better, as he lay stretched on the warm turf, unconscious of her eyes. Through his half-closed lids he watched the little grey-blue butterflies which flickered round him in the sunny air, emerging from, or melting into, the eternal vault of blue.

‘Percival!’

She had spoken, and ended the long silence. She almost fancied that her voice shook and sounded strange, but he did not seem to notice it. ‘Yes?’ he said, and turned his face to her, the face that was the whole world to Lottie.

‘Percival, is it true that your father was the eldest son, and that you ought to be the heir?’

He opened his eyes a little at the breathless question. Then he laughed. ‘I might have known that you could not live three months in Fordborough without hearing something of that.’

‘It is true, then? Mayn’t I know?’

‘Certainly.’ He raised himself on his elbow. ‘But there is no injustice in the matter, Lottie. The eldest son died, and my father was the second. He wanted to have his own way, as we most of us do, and he gave up his expectations and had it. He did it with his eyes open, and it was a fair bargain.’

‘He sold his birthright, like Esau? Well, that might be quite right for him, but isn’t it rather hard on you?’

‘Not at all,’ he answered promptly. ‘I never counted on it, and therefore I am not

disappointed. Why should I complain of not having what I did not expect to have? Shall I feel very hardly used, when the Archbishopric of Canterbury falls vacant, and they pass me over?'

'But your father shouldn't have given up your rights,' the girl persisted.

'Why, Lottie,' he said with a smile; 'it was before I was born. And I'm not so sure about my rights. I don't know that I have any particular rights or wrongs.' There was a pause, and then he looked up. 'Suppose the birthright had been Jacob's, and he had thrown it away for Rachel's sake—would you have blamed him?'

'No!' said Lottie, with kindling eyes.

'Then Jacob and Rachel's son is not hardly used, and has no cause to complain of his lot,' Percival concluded, sinking back lazily.

Lottie was silent for a moment. Then she apparently changed the subject.

'Do you remember that day Mrs. Pickering called, and talked about William?'

'Oh yes—I remember. I scandalised the old lady, didn't I? Lottie, I'm half afraid I scandalised your mother into the bargain.'

'I've been thinking about what you said,' Lottie went on very seriously, 'about being idle all your life.'

'Ah!' said Percival, drawing a long breath. '*You* are going to lecture me? Well, I don't know why I should be surprised. Everyone lectures me—they don't like it, but feel it to be their duty. I daresay Addie will begin this evening.' He was amused at the idea of a reproof from Lottie, and settled his smooth cheek comfortably on his sleeve that he might listen at his ease. 'Go on,' he said; 'it's very kind of you, and I'm quite ready.'

'Suppose I'm not going to lecture you,' said Lottie.

'Why, that's still kinder. What then?'

'Suppose I think you are right.'

'Do you?'

'Yes,' she answered simply. 'William Pickering may spend his life scraping pounds and pence together. Men who can't do anything else may as well do that, for it is nice to be rich. But if you have enough, why should you spend your time over it—the best years of your life, which will never come back?'

'Never!' said Percival. 'You are right.'

There was a long pause. Lottie pulled a bit of fern, and looked at him again. There was a line between his dark brows, as if he were pursuing some thought which her words

had suggested, but he held his head down, and was silent. She threw the fern away, and pressed her hands together.

'But, Percival, you do care for money, after all. You set it above everything else, as they all do, only in a different way. You are right in what you say, but they are more honest, for they say and do alike.'

'Do I care for money? Lottie, it's the first time I have ever been charged with that!'

'Because you talk as if you didn't. But you do. Why did you say you would never marry an heiress? The colour went right up to the roots of your hair when they talked about it, and you said it would be contemptible—that was the word—contemptible. Then I suppose, if you cared for her, and she loved you with all her heart and soul, you would go away, and leave her to hate the world, and herself, and you, just because she happened to have a little money! And you say you don't care about it!'

'Lottie, you don't know what you are talking about.' His eyes were fixed on the turf. She had called up a vision in which she had no part. 'You don't understand,' he began——

'It is you who don't understand,' she answered desperately. 'You men judge girls

—I don't know how you judge them, not by themselves ; by their worldly-wise mammas, perhaps. Do you fancy we are always counting what money men have, or what we have ? It's you who think so much about it. O Percival!—the strong voice softened to sudden tenderness—‘do you think I care a straw about what I shall have one day?’

‘Good God!’ Percival looked up, and for the space of a lightning flash their eyes met. In hers he read enough to show him how blind he had been. In his she read astonishment, horror, repulsion.

Repulsion—she read it, but it was not there. To her dying day Lottie will believe that she saw it in his eyes. Did she not feel an icy stab of pain when she recognised it ? Never was she more sure of her own existence than she was sure of this. And yet it was not there. She had suddenly roused him from a dream, and he was bewildered, shocked—sorry for his girl-friend, and bitterly remorseful for himself.

Lottie knew that she had made a terrible mistake, and that Percival did not love her. There was a rushing, as of water, in her ears, a black mist swayed before her eyes. But in a moment all that was over, and she could look round again. The sunlit world glared

horribly, as if it understood, and pressed round her with a million eyes to mock her burning shame.

'No—I never thought you cared for money,' said Percival, trying to seem unconscious of that lightning glance, with all its revelations. He had not the restless fingers so many men have, and could sit contentedly without moving a muscle. But now he was plucking nervously at the turf as he spoke.

'What does it matter?' said Lottie. 'I shall come to care for it one of these days, I daresay.'

He did not answer. What could he say? He was cursing his blind folly. Poor child! Why, she *was* only a child, after all—a beautiful, headstrong, wilful child, and it was not a year since he met her in the woods with torn frock and tangled hair, her long hands bleeding from bramble scratches, and her lips stained with autumn berries. How fiercely and shyly she looked at him with her shining eyes! He remembered how she stopped abruptly in her talk, and answered him in monosyllables, and how, when he left the trio, the clear, boyish voice broke instantly into a flood of happy speech. As he lay there now, staring at the turf, he could see his red-capped vision of Liberty as plainly as

if he stood on the woodland walk again with the September leaves above him. He felt a rush of tender, brotherly pity for the poor mistaken child—'brotherly,' in default of a better word. Probably a brother would have been more keenly alive to the forward folly of Lottie's conduct. Percival would have liked to hold out his hand to the girl, to close it round hers in a tight grasp of fellowship and sympathy, and convey to her, in some better way than the clumsy utterance of words, that he asked her pardon for the wrong he had unconsciously done her, and besought her to be his friend and comrade for ever. But he could not do anything of the kind ; he dared not even look up, lest a glance should scorch her as she quivered in her humiliation. He ended as he began, by cursing the serene certainty that all was so harmless and so perfectly understood, which had blinded his eyes, and brought him to this !

And Lottie ? She hardly knew what she thought. A wild dream of a desert island in tropic seas, with palms towering in the hot air, and snow-white surf dashing on the coral shore, and herself and Cock Robin parted from all the world by endless leagues of ocean, flitted before her eyes. But that was impossible, absurd.

He was laughing at her, no doubt ; scorning her in his heart. Oh, why had she been so mad ? Suppose a thunderbolt were to fall from the blue sky and crush him into eternal silence, as he lay at her feet, pulling his little blades of grass. No ! Lottie did not wish that—the thought was hideous. Yet had not such a wish had a momentary life as she stared at the hot blue sky ? Was it written there, or wandering in the air, or uttered in the busy humming of the flies, so that as she gazed and listened she became conscious of its purport ? Surely she never wished it. Why could not the grey rock, against which she leaned, totter and fall and bury her for ever, hiding her body from sight while her spirit fled from Percival ? Yet even that was not enough—they might meet in some hereafter. Lottie longed for annihilation in that moment of despair.

This could not last. It passed, as the first faintness had done, and with an aching sense of shame and soreness (almost worse to bear, because there was no exaltation in it) she came back to everyday life. She pushed her hair from her forehead, and got up. 'I suppose you are not going to stay here all day,' she said.

Percival stretched himself with an air of

indolent carelessness. 'No, I suppose not. Do you think duty calls us to go back at once?'

'It is getting late,' was her curt reply; and he rose without another word.

She was grave and quiet; if anything, she was more self-possessed than he was, only she never looked at him. Perhaps if he could have made her understand what was in his heart, when first he realised the meaning of her hasty words, she might have grasped the friendly hand he longed to hold out to her. But not now. Her face had hardened strangely, as if it were cut in stone. They went down the hill in silence; Percival appearing greatly interested in the landscape. As they crossed the level meadows Lottie looked round with a queer fancy that she might meet the other Lottie there, the girl who had crossed them an hour before. At the ditch Thorne held out his hand again. She half turned, looked straight into his eyes with a passionate glance of hatred, and sprang across, leaving him to follow.

He rejoined her as she reached the glade. While they had been on the hill the sun had sunk below the arching boughs, and half the beauty of the scene was gone. The noisy picnic party had unpacked their hampers, the

turf was littered with paper and straw, and a driver stood in a central position, with his head thrown back, drinking beer from a bottle. Lottie went straight to the well, and took another draught.

'Two wishes in one day?' said Percival.

'Second thoughts are best,' she answered, turning coldly away. 'Is there no other way home? I hate walking the same way twice.'

'There is the road; I'm afraid it may be hot, but it would be a change.'

'I should prefer the road,' she said.

That walk seemed interminable to Percival Thorne. He was ready to believe that the road lengthened itself, in sheer spite, to leagues of arid dust, and that every familiar landmark fled before him. At last, however, they approached a point where two ways diverged—the one leading straight into the old town, while the other, wide and trimly kept, passed between many bright new villas and gardens. At that corner they might part. But before they reached it a slim, grey-clad figure appeared from the suburban road, and strolled leisurely towards them. Percival looked, looked again, shaded his eyes, and looked: 'Why, it's Horace!' he exclaimed.

Lottie made no reply, but she awoke from her sullen musing, a light flashed into her eyes, and she quickened her pace towards the man who should deliver her from her *tête-à-tête* with Percival.

CHAPTER V.

WHY NOT LOTTIE ?

PERCIVAL advanced to meet his cousin. 'You here, Horace?' he said.

'So it seems,' the other replied, in a voice which sounded exactly as if Percival had answered his own question.

The two young men were wonderfully alike, though hardly one person in a hundred could see it. They were exactly the same height, their features were similar, they walked across the room in precisely the same way, and unconsciously reproduced each other's tricks of manner with singular fidelity. Yet any remark on this resemblance would almost certainly encounter a wondering stare, and 'Oh, do you think so? Well, I must confess I can't see much likeness myself'; the fact being that the similarity was in form and gait, while both colour and expression differed greatly. Horace's hair had the same strong

waves as Percival's, but it was chestnut brown ; his eyes were a clear light grey ; his complexion showed a fatal delicacy of white and red. His expression was more varying, his smile was readier, and his glance more restless.

He had once taken a college friend, whose hobby was photography, to Brackenhill. Young Felton arrived with all his apparatus, and photographed the whole household with such inordinate demands on their time, and such atrocious results, that everyone fled from him in horror. Horace was the most patient of his victims, and Felton declared that he *would* have a good one of Thorne. But even Horace was tired out at last, and said, very mildly, that he didn't particularly care for the smell of the stuff, and he was afraid his portraits wouldn't help him to a situation if ever he wanted one—apply, stating terms and enclosing carte. That he thought it uncommonly kind of Felton to take so much trouble, but if ever he let him try again, he'd be—Sissy was there, and the sentence, which had been said over his shoulder as he leaned out of the window, ended in a puff of smoke up into the blue. Felton begged for one more, and persuaded Sissy to be his advocate. 'I've an idea that something will come of it,' said the hapless photographer. Horace

yielded at last, and sat down, grimly resolute that he would yield no more. Something *did* come of it. Felton got it very much too dark, and the result was a tolerable photograph and a startling likeness of Percival.

The incident caused some little amusement at Brackenhill, and visitors were duly puzzled with the portrait. But it was not long remembered, and people dropped into their former habit of thinking that there was but a slight resemblance between the cousins. Only Percival carried off the photograph, and was interested for a week or two in questions of doubtful identity, looking up a few old cases of mysterious claimants, and speculating as to the value of the testimony for and against them.

Horace shook hands with Lottie, and uttered his neatly-worded birthday wishes. Her answer was indistinctly murmured, but she looked up at him, and he paused, struck as by something novel and splendid, when he encountered the dark fire of her eyes. 'I left them wondering what had become of you,' he said. 'They thought you were wandering about alone somewhere, and had lost yourself.'

'Instead of which we met on the road, didn't we?' said Percival.

'Yes,' she answered indifferently. 'And you came to look for me?'

‘Of course. I was on my way to hunt up the town crier, and to make our loss known to the police. In half-an-hour’s time we should have been dragging all the ponds.’

‘I think I’d better go and set mamma’s anxious mind at rest,’ said Lottie, with a short laugh. ‘Good-bye for the present.’ She was gone in a moment, leaving the young men standing in the middle of the road. Horace made a movement as if to follow her, then checked himself, and looked at his cousin.

Percival made haste to speak. ‘So you have come down for the birthday party, too ? Where are you staying ?’

‘Oh, the Blakes find me a bed. I’m off again to-morrow morning.’

‘You are now at Scarborough with my aunt. I have it on Sissy’s authority.’

‘There’s no occasion to disturb that faith,’ said Horace lightly. ‘Are you going into the town ? I’ll walk a little way with you.’

‘You are not going to see them at Brackenhill before you leave ?’

Horace shook his head. ‘Say nothing about me. Did you tell them where you were going ?’

‘No. I don’t suppose they know of the Blakes’ existence.’

'So much the better. *I'm* not going to enlighten them.'

They strolled on side by side, and for a minute neither spoke. Horace was chafing because it had occurred to him that afternoon that Mrs. Blake seemed rather to take his devotion to Addie for granted. His path was made too smooth and obvious, and it was evident that the prize might be had for the asking. Consequently, Master Horace, who was not at all sure that he wanted it, was irritable and inclined to swerve aside.

'Are not you playing a dangerous game?' said Percival. 'Sooner or later someone will mention the fact of these visits to the Squire, and there'll be a row.'

'Well, then, there *must* be a row. It's uncommonly hard if I'm never to speak to anyone without going to Brackenhill first to ask leave,' said Horace discontentedly. 'How should you like it yourself?'

'Not at all.'

'No more do I. I'm tired of being in leading-strings, and the long and short of it is, that I mean to have my own way in this, at any rate.'

'In *this*? Is this a matter of great importance, then? Horace, mind what you are after with the Blakes.'

‘ You’re a nice consistent sort of fellow,’ said Horace.

‘ Oh, you may call me what you like,’ Percival replied.

‘ Who introduced me to these people before they came to Fordborough ? Who comes down to Brackenhill—the dullest hole now there’s no shooting—because it’s Lottie Blake’s birthday ? Whose name is a sort of household word here—Percival this, and Percival that?—Percival without any Thorne to it, mind.’

‘ I plead guilty. What then ?’

‘ What then ? Why, I wish you to remark that *this* is your example, while your precept is——’

‘ Take care what you are about with the Blakes. Yes, old fellow, you’d better leave my example alone, and stick to the precept. My wisdom takes that form, I admit.’ He spoke with more meaning than Horace perceived.

‘ Well, thanks for your advice,’ said the young man, with a laugh. ‘ Though I can’t see any particular harm in my coming down to-day.’

‘ No harm. Only remember that there is such a place as Brackenhill.’

‘ The governor oughtn’t to find fault with

me, since you're in the same boat. He never thinks you can do wrong.'

'Never.'

'You're a lucky fellow, to have only yourself to please.'

'Very lucky,' said Percival drily. 'Will you change places with me?'

'Change places? What do you mean?'

The other looked fixedly at him, and said in a pointed manner, 'I fancy it might easily be managed—with Addie Blake's help.'

The suggestion was unpleasant. Horace winced, and vented his displeasure in a random attack. 'And why Addie, I should like to know? How can you tell it is Addie at all?'

'Who, then?'

'Why not Lottie?' The words were uttered without a moment's thought, and might have been forgotten as soon as said. But Percival was taken by surprise, and a look of utter incredulity flashed across his face. Horace caught it, and was piqued.

'Unless you understand her so well that you are sure that no one else has a chance. Of course, if that is the case——'

'Not at all!' Percival exclaimed. 'It's not for me to pretend to understand Lottie—I'm not such a fool as that!'

'All the same,' Horace said to himself,

'you think you understand her better than I do, and you don't believe I should have a chance if I tried to cut you out. Well, Mr. Percy, you may be right ; but, on the other hand, you *may* be mistaken.' And as he walked back to the Blakes, Horace hurriedly resolved to teach his cousin that he was not to consider Lottie his exclusive property. He knew the folly of such a proceeding, but who was ever hindered from obeying the dictates of wounded vanity by the certainty that he had much better not ?

Percival sincerely wished the evening over. He dared not stay away, lest his absence should provoke comments, but he feared some childish outbreak of petulance on Lottie's part. When he saw her he was startled by her beauty. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were full of brilliant meaning. She cast a defiant glance at him as she went by. She was burning with shame, and maddened by the cruel injustice of her fate. A white light seemed to have poured in upon her, and she found it incredible that she could ever have felt or acted as she had felt and acted that afternoon. She said to herself that she might as well have been punished for her conduct in a dream.

Percival plucked up courage enough to

go and ask her to dance. He was distressed and pitiful, and longing to make amends, and stood before her like the humblest of suitors. She assented coolly enough. No one saw that there was anything amiss, though he was quick to remark that she gave him only square dances. No more waltzes with Lottie for him. But Horace had one, and when it was over he leaned almost exhausted against the wall, while Lottie stood by his side and fanned herself. The fan seemed to throb in unison with her strong pulses, quickened by the dance, and slackening as she rested.

'That was splendid,' said Horace, with breathless brevity. 'Best waltz I ever had.'

'Ah,' said Lottie, turning towards him. 'Suppose Addie heard that, Mr. Thorne?'

They looked straight into each other's eyes, and Horace felt a strange thrill run through him. He evaded her question with a laugh. 'Why do you call me Mr. Thorne?' he asked. 'If you call that fellow by his Christian name, why not me? Mine isn't such a mouthful as Percival—try it.'

'We knew him first, you see,' Lottie replied, with much innocence.

'As if that had anything to do with it! If you had known my grandfather first, I

suppose you would have called him Godfrey?’

‘Perhaps he wouldn’t have asked me,’ said Lottie.

Horace smiled. ‘Well, perhaps he wouldn’t. He isn’t much given to making such requests, certainly. But I do ask you. Look!’ he exclaimed, with sudden animation, ‘there’s Mrs. Blake taking that dried-up little woman—what’s her name?—to the piano. I may have the next dance, I hope?’

‘How many more things are you going to ask for all at once?’ The bright fan kept up its regular come and go, and Lottie’s eyes were very arch above it. ‘I’m sure you don’t take after your grandfather.’

‘Believe me,’ said Horace, ‘you would be awfully bored if I did. But you haven’t given me an answer. This dance?’

‘I’ve promised it to Mr. Hardwicke. Adieu, *Horace!*’ And before he could utter a syllable she was across the room, standing by the little spinster who was going to play, and helping her to undo a clashing bracelet of malachite and silver which hung on her bony wrist. Horace, gazing after her, felt a hand on his shoulder, and looked round.

‘I’m off when this dance is over,’ said Percival, who seemed weary and depressed.

'You still wish me not to say that I have seen you?'

Horace nodded. 'I shall be at Scarborough again to-morrow night. There's no occasion to say anything.'

'All right. You know best.'

'Who can tell what may happen?' said Horace. 'Why should one be in a hurry to do anything unpleasant? Put it off, and you may escape it altogether. For instance, the governor may change all at once, as people do in tracts and Christmas books. I don't say it's likely, but I feel that I ought to give him the chance.'

'Very good, said Percival, and he strolled away. Horace noted his pre-occupied look with a half-smile, but after a moment his thoughts and eyes went back to Lottie Blake, and he forgot all about his cousin and Brackenhill.

CHAPTER VI.

HER NAME.

MOST country towns have some great event which marks the year, or some peculiarity which distinguishes them from their neighbours. This one has its annual ball, that its races, another its volunteer reviews. One seems to relish no amusement which has not a semi-religious flavour, and excels in school feasts, choir festivals, and bazaars. Some places only wake up on the fifth of November, and some are devoted to amateur theatricals. Fordborough had its agricultural show.

Crowds flocked to it, not because they cared for fat cattle, steam ploughs, and big vegetables, but because everybody was to be seen there. You stared at the prize pig side by side with the head of one of the great county families, who had a faint idea that he had been introduced to you somewhere (was

it at the last election ?), and politely entered into conversation with you on the chance. You might perhaps suspect that his remembrance of you was not very clear, when you reflected afterwards that he

asked after my wife, who is dead,
And my children who never were born ;

but at any rate he meant to be civil, and people who saw you talking together would not know what he said. Or you might find the old friend you had not seen for years, gold eye-glass in hand, peering at a plate of potatoes. Or you were young, and there was a girl—no, *the* girl—the one girl in all the world—bewitchingly dressed, a miracle of beauty, looking at Jones's patent root-pulper. You lived for months on the remembrance of the words you exchanged by a friendly, though rather deafening threshing-machine, when her mamma (who never liked you) marched serenely on, unconscious that Edith was lingering behind. Then there was the flower-show, where a band from the nearest garrison town played the last new waltzes, and people walked about and looked at everything except the flowers. Fordborough was decked with flags and garlands, and appropriate sentiments on the subject of agriculture, in evergreen letters stitched on

calico, were lavishly displayed. Everyone who possessed anything beyond a wheelbarrow, got into it and drove about, the bells clashed wildly in the steeple, and everything was exceedingly merry—if it didn't rain.

People in that part of the world always filled their houses with guests when the time for the show came round. Even at Brackenhill, though the Squire said he was too old for visitors, he made a point of inviting Godfrey Hammond, while Mrs. Middleton, as soon as the day was fixed, sent off a little note to Horace. It was taken for granted that Horace would come. Aunt Harriet considered his invariable presence with them on that occasion as a public acknowledgment of his position at Brackenhill. But the day was gone by when Mr. Thorne delighted to parade his grandson round the field, showing off the slim handsome lad, and proving to the county that, with his heir by his side, he could defy the son who had defied him. Matters were changed since then. The county had, as it were, accepted Horace. The quarrel was five-and-twenty years old, and had lost its savour. It was tacitly assumed that Alfred had, in some undefined way, behaved very badly; that he had been

very properly put on one side, and that in the natural course of things Horace would succeed his grandfather, and was a nice, gentlemanly young fellow. Mr. Thorne had only to stick to what he had done to ensure the approval of society.

But people did not want, and did not understand, the foreign-looking young man, with the olive complexion and sombre eyes, who had begun of late years to come and go about Brackenhill, and who was said to be able to turn old Thorne round his finger. This was not mere rumour. The Squire's own sister complained of his infatuation. It is true that she also declared that she believed the new-comer to be a very good young fellow, but the complaint was accepted, and the addition smiled away. 'It is easy to see what her good young man wants there,' said her friends, and there was a general impression that it was a shame. Opinions concerning the probable result varied, and people offered airily to bet on Horace or Percival as their calculations inclined them. The majority thought that old Thorne could never have the face to veer round again; but there was the possibility on Percival's side that his grandfather might die intestate, and, with so capricious and un-

accountable a man, it did not seem altogether improbable. •‘Then,’ as people sagely remarked, ‘this fellow would inherit—that is, if Alfred’s marriage was all right.’ No one had any fault, except of a negative kind, to find with Percival, yet the majority of Mr. Thorne’s old friends were inclined to dislike him. He did not hunt, nor go to races ; he cared little for horses and dogs. No one understood him. He was indolent and sweet-tempered, and he was supposed to be satirical and scheming. What could his grandfather see in him to prefer him to Horace ? Percival would have answered with a smile, ‘I am not his heir.’

Mr. Thorne was happy this July, his boy having come to Brackenhill for a few days, which would include the show.

It was the evening before, and they were all assembled. Horace, coffee-cup in hand, leant in his favourite attitude against the chimney-piece. He was troubled and depressed, repulsed Mrs. Middleton’s smiling attempts to draw him out, and added very little to the general conversation. ‘Sulky’ was Mr. Thorne’s verdict.

Percival was copying music for Sissy. She stood near him, bending forward to catch the full light of the lamp to aid her in picking

up a dropped stitch in her aunt's knitting. Close by them sat Godfrey Hammond in an easy-chair.

He was a man of three or four and forty, by no means handsome, but very well satisfied with his good figure, and his keen, refined features. He wanted colour, his closely-cut hair was sandy, his eyes were of the palest grey, and his eyebrows faintly marked. He was slightly underhung, and did not attempt to hide the fact, wearing neither beard nor moustache. His face habitually wore a questioning expression.

Godfrey Hammond never lamented his want of good looks, but he bitterly regretted the youth which he had lost. His regret seemed somewhat premature. His fair complexion showed little trace of age; he had never known what illness was, and men ten or fifteen years younger might have envied him his slight active figure. But in truth the youth which he regretted was a dream. It was that legendary Golden Age which crowns the whole world with far-off flowers, and fills hearts with longings for its phantom loveliness. The present seemed to Hammond hopeless, commonplace, and cold, a dull procession of days tending downwards to the grave. He was thus far justified in his regrets,

that if his youth were as full of beauty and enthusiasm as he imagined it, he was very old indeed.

‘What band are they going to have to-morrow, Percival?’ asked Sissy.

‘I did hear, but I forget. Stay, they gave me a programme when I was at the book-seller’s this afternoon.’ He thrust his hand into his pocket, and pulled out a handful of papers and letters. ‘It was a pink thing—I thought you would like it—what has become of it, I wonder?’

As he turned the papers over, a photograph slipped out of its envelope. Sissy saw it.

‘Percival, is that some one’s carte? May I look?’

‘What!’ said Godfrey Hammond, sticking a glass in his eye, and peering short-sightedly. ‘Percy taking to carrying photographs about with him—wonders will never cease! What fair lady may it be? Come, man, let us have a look at her.’

Percival coloured very slightly, and then, as it were, contradicted his blush by tossing the envelope and its contents across to Godfrey.

‘No fair lady. Ask Sissy what she thinks of him.’

'Why, it's young Lisle!' said Hammond. Mr. Thorne looked up with sudden interest.

Percival reclaimed the photograph. 'Here, Sissy, what do you say? Should you like him for your album?'

'For my album! A man I never saw! Who is he?' Miss Langton inquired. 'Oh! he's very handsome, though—isn't he?'

Percival saw his grandfather was looking. 'It's Mr. Lisle's son,' he said.

'And very handsome? Doesn't take after his father.'

(Mr. Lisle had been Percival's guardian for the few months between his father's death and his majority. It had been a great grief to Mr. Thorne. Something which he said to his grandson when he first came to Brackenhill had been met by the rejoinder, very cool though perfectly respectful in tone, 'But, sir, if Mr. Lisle does not disapprove——' The power-loving old man could not pardon Mr. Lisle for having an authority over Percival which should have belonged to him.)

He put on his spectacles to look at the photograph which Sissy brought. It was impossible to deny the beauty of the face, though the style was rather effeminate; the features were almost faultless.

'Is it like him?' said Sissy, looking up at young Thorne.

‘Very like,’ he replied; ‘it doesn’t flatter him at all, if that is what you mean. Does it, Hammond?’

‘Not at all.’

‘He used to sing in the choir of their church,’ Percival went on. ‘They photographed him once in his surplice—a sort of ideal chorister. All the old ladies went into raptures, and said he looked like an angel.’

‘And the young ladies?’ said Mrs. Middleton.

‘Showed that they thought it.’

‘H’m!’ said Mr. Thorne; ‘and where may this paragon be?’

‘At Oxford.’

‘Going into the Church?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure. Not that I ever heard; I don’t fancy his tastes lie that way. He is very musical—probably that was why he joined the choir.’

‘I should say Lisle had money enough,’ said Godfrey Hammond; ‘he lives in very good style—if anything a little too showy, perhaps. He won’t want a profession. Most likely he will spend his life in thinking that one of these days he will do something wonderful, and convulse the musical world. Happy fellow!’

‘But suppose he doesn’t do it?’ said Sissy.

'Happier fellow still! He will never have a doubt, and never know what failure is.'

'Perhaps,' she said, looking at the bright, beautiful face, 'it would be better if Mr. Lisle were poor.'

'I doubt if he would appreciate the kindness which doomed him to poverty,' smiled Hammond.

'But perhaps he would not only dream then of something great—he might do it,' said Sissy. 'That is, do you think he could really do anything great?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. Talent looks very big in a small room.'

'Is he the only one?' Mrs. Middleton inquired of Percival.

'The only son; there is a daughter.'

'A daughter! Is she as wonderful as her brother?' Sissy exclaimed. 'Have you got her photograph? What is she like?'

'I will tell you,' said Godfrey Hammond, speaking very deliberately, in his high-pitched voice. 'Miss Lisle is a very charming young lady. She is like her brother, but she is not so good-looking, and she is decidedly more masculine.'

'Oh!' in a disdainful tone. Then, turning swiftly round, 'But what do you say, Percival?'

He answered her, but he looked at Godfrey :

‘Hardly a fair description ; not so much a portrait as a caricature. Miss Lisle’s features are not so perfect as her brother’s ; she would not attract the universal admiration which he does. But I think there could be no question that hers is the nobler face.’

‘She is fortunate in her champion,’ said Hammond. ‘It’s all right, no doubt, and the fault is mine. I may not have so keen an eye for latent nobility.’

‘Stick to her brother, then, and let Miss Lisle alone,’ and Percival stooped over his copying again. Sissy came back to the table ; but as she passed the lonely figure by the chimney-piece she spoke :

‘You are very silent to-night, Horace.’

‘I don’t seem to have much to say for myself, do I ?’

She took up her knitting, and, after a moment, he came and stood by her. The light fell on his face. ‘And you don’t look well,’ she said.

‘There’s not much amiss with me.’

‘I shall betray you,’ said Percival, as he ruled a line ; ‘he coughed in the hall, Sissy ; I heard him—three times.’

‘Oh, my dear boy, you should take more

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'Oh!' in a disdainful tone. Then, turning swiftly round, 'But what do you say, Percival?'

He answered her, but he looked at Godfrey :

‘Hardly a fair description ; not so much a portrait as a caricature. Miss Lisle’s features are not so perfect as her brother’s ; she would not attract the universal admiration which he does. But I think there could be no question that hers is the nobler face.’

‘She is fortunate in her champion,’ said Hammond. ‘It’s all right, no doubt, and the fault is mine. I may not have so keen an eye for latent nobility.’

‘Stick to her brother, then, and let Miss Lisle alone,’ and Percival stooped over his copying again. Sissy came back to the table ; but as she passed the lonely figure by the chimney-piece she spoke :

‘You are very silent to-night, Horace.’

‘I don’t seem to have much to say for myself, do I ?’

She took up her knitting, and, after a moment, he came and stood by her. The light fell on his face. ‘And you don’t look well,’ she said.

‘There’s not much amiss with me.’

‘I shall betray you,’ said Percival, as he ruled a line ; ‘he coughed in the hall, Sissy ; I heard him—three times.’

‘Oh, my dear boy, you should take more

care,' exclaimed Aunt Middleton; 'I know you have been dreadfully ill.'

'I was blissfully unconscious of it, then,' said Horace. 'It was nothing, and I'm all right, thank you. You are very busy, Sissy; what are you worrying about down there?'

He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder. Percival and she acted brother and sister, sometimes; but with Horace, whose pet and playfellow she had been as a little child, it was much more like reality.

'Only a stitch gone.'

'Well, let it go; you have lots without it.'

'You silly boy, it isn't that. Don't you know it would run further and further, and ruin the whole work, if it were not picked up at once?'

'You may not be aware of it,' said Hammond, 'but that sounds remarkably like a tract.'

'Then I hope you'll all profit by it. Horace, do you hear? If ever you drop a stitch, be warned.' She looked up as she said it, and something in his face made her fancy that he *had* dropped a stitch of some kind.

When she was saying good-night to Percival, Sissy asked abruptly, in a low voice, 'What is Miss Lisle's name?'

He answered: 'Judith.'

CHAPTER VII.

JAEI, OR JUDITH, OR CHARLOTTE CORDAY.

SISSY, when she reached her room that night, drew up the blind, and stood looking out at the park, which was flooded with moonlight.

‘It ought to be Percival’s,’ she thought. ‘I should like Horace to have plenty of money, but the old house ought to be Percival’s. He is so good—he screens Horace instead of thinking of himself. I do believe Horace is in some scrape now. And Aunt Middleton is always thinking about him too: she won’t let Uncle Thorne be just to Percival. Oh, it is a shame.

‘If he had Brackenhill perhaps he would marry Miss Lisle. I wonder if he is in love with her. He spoke so coolly, not as if he were the least bit angry when Godfrey Hammond laughed at her. But he said she had a noble face.

‘What did it remind me of when he said

"Judith?" Sissy was perplexed for a few moments, and then their talk on the terrace a month before flashed into her mind. 'Jael, or Judith, or Charlotte Corday,' and she remembered the very intonation with which Percival had repeated 'Judith.' 'Ah!' said the girl half-aloud, with a sudden intuition, 'he was thinking of her when he talked of heroic women!

'Why wasn't I born noble and heroic as well as others? Is it my fault if I can't *bear* people to be angry with me, if I always stop and think and hesitate, and then the moment is gone? I couldn't have driven the nail in, like Jael, for fear there should be just time for him to look up at me. I should have thrown the hammer down, and died, I think. I wonder what made her able to do it; how she struck, and how she felt when the nail went crashing in! I wonder whether I *could* have done it if Sisera had hated Percival, if I knew he meant to kill him, if it had been Percival's life or his?'

Sissy proceeded to ponder the Biblical narrative (with this slight variation), but she came to no satisfactory decision. She inclined to the opinion that Sisera would have woke up, somehow. She could not imagine what she could possibly feel like when the

deed was done, except that she was certain she should be afraid ever to be alone with herself again for one moment as long as she lived.

So she went back to the original question. 'I daresay Miss Lisle is brave and calm, and horribly strong-minded—why wasn't I born the same as she was? Perhaps Percival would have cared for me then. He *did* say even I might find something I could die for; he didn't think I was quite a coward. Ah! if I could only show him I wasn't!'

She stood for a moment looking out.

'He may marry Miss Lisle if he likes, and—and I hope they'll be very happy indeed. But if ever I get a chance I'll do something—for Percival.'

With which magnanimous determination Sissy went to bed; and if she did not have a nightmare tumult of Jael and Judith, nails and hammers, and murdered men, about her pillow as she slept, I can but think her fortunate. But her last thought was a happy one.

'Perhaps he doesn't care about her, after all!'

CHAPTER VIII.

'PERHAPS I'M LETTING SECRETS OUT.'

FORDBOROUGH had a glorious day for the Agricultural Show. Not a cloud dimmed the brightness of the sky ; a breath of warm wind stirred the flags from time to time, and all was going as merrily as possible. The dogs were all barking in their special division, the poultry were all cackling in theirs. People had looked at the animals, as in duty bound, and werẽ now putting their catalogues in their pockets, and crowding into the flower-show.

The Brackenhill party were there. Mr. Thorne, his sister, Godfrey Hammond, and Miss Langton had come over in state behind the sleek chestnut horses, and the young men had arranged to follow in the dog-cart. At present the two divisions had not met—nay, showed no symptom of uniting, but rather of breaking up into three or four. Mrs.

Middleton and Sissy had been walking about, encountering a bewildering number of acquaintances, and earnestly endeavouring to disseminate a knowledge of the fact that they considered it a beautiful day. Godfrey Hammond, their squire for some time, after arranging when he would meet them by the tent where the potatoes were, had taken himself off to look up some of the country gentlemen whom he met year after year when he came down to Brackenhill. There happened to be several squires of the old sort in the neighbourhood, and with these Godfrey Hammond enjoyed a friendship based on mutual contempt. He laughed at them, and they knew it. They laughed at him, and he knew it; and each being convinced that his cause for scorn was the one well founded, they all got on delightfully together. Mr. Thorne, meanwhile, was strolling round the field, halting to talk from time to time, but fettered by no companionship.

He was presently pounced on by Mrs. Rawlinson, a fair, flushed beauty of two-and-forty, with a daughter of fifteen. People with a turn for compliment always supposed that this daughter was Mrs. Rawlinson's sister, and when that assumption was

negatived, there had once been a prompt reply, 'Oh, your *step*-daughter you mean!' (The man who invented that last refinement of politeness was welcome to dine at the Rawlinsons' whenever he liked, and, the dinners being good, he was to be met there about twice a week.)

She came down upon Mr. Thorne like a bright blue avalanche. 'Ah!' she said, having shaken hands with him, 'I saw what you were doing! Now, do you agree with Mr. Horace Thorne in his taste! Oh, it's no use denying it; I saw you were looking at the beautiful Miss Blake.'

'It is very possible,' Mr. Thorne replied; 'only I didn't know of her existence.'

'Oh, how severe you are! I suppose you mean you don't admire that style? Well, now you mention it, perhaps——'

'I simply mean what I say. I was not aware that there was a Miss Blake on the ground to-day.'

'Well, I *am* surprised! You *are* in the dark! Do you see those tall girls in black and white, close by their mother, that fine woman in green?'

'Perfectly. And which is the beautiful Miss Blake?'

'Oh!' with a little giggle. 'Fancy!

Which is the beautiful Miss Blake? Why, the elder one, of course—there! she is just looking round.’

Mr. Thorne put up his eyeglass. ‘In—deed!’ he said; ‘and who may Miss Blake be?’

‘They have come to that pretty white house where old Miss Hayward lived. Mr. Blake was a relation of hers, and she left it to him. He has some sort of business in London—very rich, they say, and all the young men are after the daughters.’

‘Probably the daughters haven’t the same opinion of the young men of the present day that I have,’ said Mr. Thorne; ‘so I needn’t pity them.’

‘Fancy your not knowing anything about them! I *am* surprised!’ Mrs. Rawlinson repeated. ‘Such friends of Mr. Horace Thorne’s too. Ah, by the way, you must mind what you say about the young men who are after them. He’s quite a favourite there, I’m told.’

‘Perhaps Horace told you,’ the old gentleman suggested, with a quiet smile; ‘the news sounds as if it might come from that authority.’

‘Oh, no; I think not. Anyone in Fordborough could tell you all about it. I suppose

this summer—but dear me, here am I rattling on; perhaps I'm letting secrets out!

'Not much of a secret if it is Fordborough talk,' said Mr. Thorne, blandly. But something in the expression of his eyes made Mrs. Rawlinson feel that she was on dangerous ground, and at any rate she had said enough. She hurried off to greet a friend she saw in the distance.

Mr. Thorne was speedily joined by a neighbouring landowner. 'I didn't know I should see you here to-day,' he said to the newcomer. 'I heard you were laid up.'

Mr. Garnett cursed his gout, but declared himself better.

'Look here,' said Thorne, laying his hand on the other's sleeve; 'you know everyone. Who and what are these Blakes?'

'Bless me! you don't mean you don't know? Why, the name's up in every railway station in the United Kingdom. "Patent British Corn Flour"—that's the man. "Delicious Pudding in Five Minutes"—you know the sort of thing. I don't know that he does much in it now. I suppose he has a share. Very rich, they say.'

Mr. Thorne had withdrawn his hand, and was listening with the utmost composure. 'Ah!' he said; 'very rich. And so all these

good Fordborough people are paying court to him.’

‘No,’ Garnett grinned, ‘they don’t get the chance; don’t see much of him. No loss. They pay court to the daughters; it does just as well, and it’s a great deal pleasanter. Dear, dear! what a money-loving age it is! Nothing but trade, trade, trade. We shall see a duke behind the counter before long, if we go on at this rate. Gentlemen used to be more particular in our young days—eh, Thorne?’

Having said this he remembered that Thorne’s son married the candlemaker’s daughter. For a moment he was confounded, and then had to repress an inclination to laugh.

‘Ah, it was a different world altogether,’ said Thorne, gliding dexterously away from the corn-flour and candles too. ‘There was a young fellow staying with us a little while ago who was wild about photography. If he didn’t get just the right focus, the thing came out all wrong; he always made a mess of his groups. The focus was right for us in our young days, eh? Now we have to stand on one side, and come out all awry. No fault in the sun, you know.’

‘I don’t care much about photographs,’ said Garnett. ‘All very well for the young folks, I dare say, but I shan’t make a pretty

picture on this side of doomsday!' And indeed it did not seem likely that he would. So he departed, grinning, to say to the next man he met: 'What do you think I've been doing? Laughing about Blake's Patent Corn-Flour to old Thorne—forgot the composite candles—did, upon my word! Said "Gentlemen used to be more particular in *our* young days," and the minute it was out of my mouth I remembered Jim and the candles! Fine girl she was certainly. Poor old Thorne, he was terribly cut up at the time. It was grand to see the two old fellows meet, as good as a play. Thorne held out just the tips of his fingers—I believe he thought if he shook hands with old Benham he should smell of tallow for ever. Ever see Benham's monument? They ordered it down from town—man knew nothing of course—how should he? So he went and put some angels weeping, and an inverted torch, just like a bundle of candles—fact, by Jove! I went to have a look at it myself one day. Some of the Benhams were very sore about it. Dear, dear! I shouldn't think the old fellow can ever have had a quiet night there with that over him. Only, as he was covered up snugly first, perhaps he doesn't know.' And Garnett, chuckling to himself at the idea, marched off to have a look at the prize pig.

Meanwhile the young Thornes had arrived, and came strolling round the field, a noticeable pair enough, tall, handsome, and well-dressed, walking side by side in all faith and friendliness, as they were not often to walk again. When people talked of them afterwards, a good many remembered how they looked on that day. Apparently Horace had resolved to throw off his trouble of the night before, and had succeeded. There was something almost defiant in the very brightness of his aspect, and the heat had flushed him a little, so that no one would have echoed Sissy's exclamation of 'You don't look well.' On the contrary, he was congratulated on his looks by many of his old friends, and seemed full of life and energy.

Turning the corner of one of the tents they came suddenly on the Blakes. There was not one of the four who was utterly unconcerned at that meeting, though the interests and motives which produced the little thrill of excitement were curiously mingled and opposed. Two pairs of eyes flashed bright signals of mutual understanding, the others made no sign of what might be hidden in their depths. Delicately-gloved hands were held out, Mrs. Blake came forward fluent and friendly, and the two groups melted into one.

Horace and Addie led the way round the tent. Percival followed with Lottie and her mother, feeling that he had never rightly appreciated the latter's conversational powers before. When they emerged into the sunlight again they encountered Mrs. Pickering and her girls, and in the talk which ensued our hero found himself standing by Addie.

'Percival,' she said in a low quick voice, 'don't be surprised. I want to say a word to you. Look as if it were nothing.'

Though he was startled, he contrived not to betray it. After the first moment there is small danger of failing to appear indifferent—very great danger of seeming preternaturally indifferent. Percival had tact enough to avoid this. He listened, and replied with the polite attention which was natural to him, but his manner was tinged—any words I can find seem too coarse to describe it—with just the faintest shade of languor, just the slightest possible show of scorn and weariness of the great agricultural show itself. It was not enough to attract notice, it was quite enough to preclude any idea of excited interest.

'I am in a little difficulty,' said Addie. 'You could help me if you would.'

'You may command me.'

'You will not mind a little trouble?' And:

you would keep my secret? I have no right to ask, but there is no one—I think you are my friend.'

'Suppose me a brother for this occasion, Addie. Waste no more time in apologies.'

'A brother—be it so. Then, my brother, I have to go through Langley Wood to-morrow evening, and I am afraid to go alone.'

'I will gladly be your escort. Where shall I meet you?'

'There is a milestone about a quarter of a mile on the road to our house, after you have passed the gate into the wood. Don't come any further. Somewhere between the gate and that.'

'I know it. At what time?'

'Half-past eight, or a few minutes earlier. Will that suit you?'

'Perfectly. I will be there.'

'If you don't see me before nine, don't wait for me. I shall have failed somehow.'

'I understand,' said Percival.

'I will explain to-morrow. You must trust me till then.'

'You shall do as you please. I don't ask for any explanations, remember. Have you been having much croquet lately?'

'Oh, much as usual. Lottie has been beating me, also as usual. We have joined the Fordborough Croquet Club.'

'Then I suspect the former members feel small.'

'One or two of the best players feel ill-tempered, I think, unless they make-believe very much. Lottie means to win the ivory mallet, she says, and I think she will. Mrs. Rawlinson's sister always considered herself the champion, and I am sure Lottie,' &c. &c.

In short, by the time it occurred to anybody that Percival and Addie were talking together, their conversation, carried smoothly on, was precisely what anybody might hear.

The Pickerings went off in one direction, the Blakes in another, and the young men resumed their walk.

'That's over, and the governor not by,' said Horace.

'Don't be too secure,' was Percival's reply. 'Everybody talks about everybody else at Fordborough.'

'Well,' said Horace, who apparently would not be discouraged, 'it's something not to have been standing between the old gentleman and Aunt Middleton, and then to have seen Mrs. Blake sailing straight at one, her face illuminated with a smile visible to the naked eye a quarter of a mile off—eh, Percy?'

'You are a lucky fellow, no doubt,' said Percival.

‘And, after all, it is quite possible——’

‘That you may be a very lucky fellow indeed? Yes, it is quite possible. But I don’t quite see what you are after, Horace.’

(‘Nor I,’ thought Horace to himself, ‘and that’s the charm of it, somehow.’)

‘Surely it isn’t worth while getting into trouble with my grandfather for a mere flirtation.’

‘If you always stop to think whether a thing is worth while or not, Percy, I wouldn’t be you for all the money that ever was coined.’

‘And if it is more,’ said the other, not heeding the remark—‘I like fair play, but if it is more——’

‘What then?’ For Percival hesitated.

‘We’ll talk of that another time,’ said the latter. ‘Not now. Only don’t be rash. Look, there’s Sissy.’

‘How pretty she is,’ thought Percival, as they went towards her. ‘What can Horace see in Addie Blake, that he should prefer her? She is a fine girl, handsome—magnificent, if you like—but Sissy is like a beautiful old picture, sweet and delicate and innocent. I can’t fancy her with secrets like Addie with this Langley Wood mystery of hers. If it had not been for that ideal of mine——’

They had reached the two ladies.

Meanwhile Mr. Thorne had listened to more odds and ends of gossip, and had gone on his way, warily searching among the shifting, many-coloured groups. He was curious, and in due time his curiosity was gratified. The Blake girls passed him so closely that he could have touched them. They knew perfectly well who he was, and Lottie looked at him, but Addie passed on, in her queenly fashion, with her head high, apparently not aware of his existence.

'So,' said the old gentleman to himself, 'that is Horace's taste. Well, she is very superb and disdainful, and I should think Patent Corn Flour paid pretty well. She might have bestowed a glance on me, as I suppose she destines me the honour of being her grandpapa-in-law, but no doubt she knows what she is about, and it may be wiser to seem utterly unconscious, as Horace has not introduced us yet. Perhaps he will defer that ceremony a little while longer still.

'As for the other, she looked me straight in the face, as if she didn't care a rap for any man living. I shouldn't think that girl was afraid of anything on earth—or under it—or above it, for that matter. A temper of her own, plainly enough. The beautiful Miss

'Blake is Horace's taste, of course (I could have sworn to that without a word from him), and ninety-nine out of a hundred would agree with him. But if I were five-and-twenty, and had to choose between them, I'd take that fierce-eyed girl—and tame her!'

Of which process it may fairly be conjectured that it would have ended in total defeat for Mr. Thorne, or in mutual and inextinguishable hatred, or, it might be, for he was hard as well as capricious, in a Lottie like a broken bow. In neither case a very desirable result.

Godfrey Hammond, looking at his watch, and going in the direction of the tent where the potatoes were, perceived Mrs. Rawlinson, and endeavoured to elude her. He loathed the woman, as he candidly owned to himself, because he had once very nearly approached the other extreme. It was a horrible thought. What had come over him and her? Either she was strangely and hideously transformed—and how could he tell that as fearful a change might not have come to him?—or else his youth was a time of illusion and bad taste. That perfect time, that golden dawn of manhood when the world lay before him steeped in rosy light, when every pleasure had its

bloom upon it, and every day was crowned with joy—Good heavens! was it *then* that he cared to dance the polka in Fordborough drawing-rooms with Mrs. Rawlinson—Lydia Lloyd as she was of old? Little did that fascinating lady think what disgust at the remembrance of his incredible folly was in his soul as he met her.

For she caught, and shook hands with him, and would not let him go till she had reminded him of old times as if they might have been yesterday, and might be again to-morrow. He smiled, and blandly made answer as if they two were a pair of ante-diluvian polka-dancers left in a waltzing age to see another generation spinning gaily round. (He could dance quite as well as Horace when he chose.) Mrs. Rawlinson did not like his style of conversation, and said abruptly—

'I had a talk with Mr. Thorne about half-an-hour ago. I *was* surprised! Mr. Horace Thorne seems to keep the old man quite in the dark.'

'Mr. Horace Thorne is a clever fellow, then,' said Hammond drily.

'Oh, you know all about it, I daresay. But really I *did* think it was too bad! He didn't seem ever to have heard Miss Blake's

name. He certainly didn’t know her when he saw her.’

‘Unfortunate man! For Miss Blake so decidedly eclipses the Fordborough young ladies, that such ignorance is deplorable. No doubt you did what you could to remove it?’

‘Well!’—Mrs. Rawlinson tossed her blue bonnet—‘I really thought I ought to give him a hint—it seemed to me that it was quite a charity.’

‘A charity—ah yes, of course. Charity never faileth, does it?’ And Hammond raised his hat, and bowed himself off.

CHAPTER IX.

SISSY LOOKS INTO THE MIRROR.

A LADY'S hero generally has ample leisure. He may write novels, or poems, or paint the picture or carve the statue of the season, or he is a statesman and rules the destinies of nations, or he makes money mysteriously in the City, or even, it may be, not less mysteriously on the turf, but he does it in his odd minutes. That is his characteristic. Perhaps he spends his morning in stupendous efforts to gratify a wish, expressed in smiling hopelessness by the heroine; later, he calls on her, or he rides with her; evening comes—he dances with her till the first grey streak of dawn has touched the eastern sky. He goes home. His pen flies along the paper—he is knee-deep in manuscript; he is possessed with burning enthusiasm and energy; her features grow in idealised loveliness beneath his chisel, or the sunny tide of daylight pours

in, to irradiate the finished picture, as well as the exhausted artist, with a golden glory. He has a talent for sitting up. He gets up very early indeed if he is in the country, but he never goes to bed early, or when would he achieve his triumphs ? Some things, it is true, must be done by day, but half-an-hour will work wonders. The gigantic intellect is brought to bear on the confidential clerk ; the latter is, as it were, wound up, and the great machine goes on. Or a hasty telegram arrives as the guests file in to dinner. ' Pardon me, one moment,' and instantly something is sent off in cypher which shall change the face of Europe. Unmoved, the hero returns to the love-making which is the true business of life.

There is poetry and romance enough in many an outwardly prosaic life. How often have we been told this ? Nay, we have read stories in which the hero possesses a season-ticket, and starts from his trim suburban home after an early breakfast, to return in due time to dine, perhaps to talk a little 'shop' over the meal, and, it may be, even to feel somewhat sleepy in the evening. But as far as my experience goes, the day on which the story opens is the last on which he does all this. That morning he meets the woman with the haunting eyes, or the old friend who died long

ago—did not the papers say so?—and whose resurrection includes a secret or two. Or he is sent for to some out-of-the-way spot in the country, where there is a mysterious business of some kind to be unravelled. At any rate, he needs his season-ticket never again, but changes more or less into the hero we all know.

It is hard work for these unresting men no doubt, yet what is to be done? Unless the double-shift system can in any way be applied for their relief, I fear they must continue to toil by night that they may appear to be idle men.

And after all, were the hero not altogether heroic, one is tempted to doubt if this abundant leisure is quite a gain.

Addie Blake, planning some bright little scheme, which needed a whole day, and an unoccupied squire, said once to Godfrey Hammond, 'You can't think what a comfort it is to get someone who hasn't to go to business every day. I hate the very name of business! Now you are always at hand when you are wanted.'

'Yes,' he said, 'we idle men have a great advantage over the busy ones, no doubt; but I think it almost more than counterbalanced by our terrible disadvantage.'

‘What is that?’

‘We are at hand when we are not wanted,’ said Godfrey seriously.

And I think he was right. One may have a great liking—nay, something warmer than liking—for one’s companions in endless idle *tête-à-têtes*, but they are perilous nevertheless. Some day the pale ghost—weariness, *ennui*, dearth of ideas, I hardly know what its true name is—comes into the room to see if the atmosphere will suit it, and sits down between you. You cannot see the colourless spectre, but are conscious of a slight exhaustion in the air. Everything requires a little effort—to breathe, to question, to answer, to look up, to appear interested. You feel that it is your own fault, perhaps; you would gladly take all the blame if you could only take all the burden. Perhaps the failing *is* yours, but it is your fault only as it is the fault of an electric eel that after many shocks his power is weakened, and he wants to be left alone to recover it.

Still, though there may be no fault, it is a terrible thing to feel one’s heart sink suddenly when one’s friend pauses for a moment in the doorway as if about to return. One thinks, if weariness cannot be kept at bay in the society of those we love, where can we be safe from the cold and subtle blight? As soon as we

are conscious of it, it seems to become part of us, and we shrink from the popular idea of the hereafter, assured of finding our spectre even in the courts of heaven.

Godfrey Hammond expressed the fear of too much companionship in speech, Percival Thorne in action. He was given to lonely walks if the weather were fine, to shutting himself in his own room with a book if it were wet. He would dream for hours, for I will frankly confess that when he was shut up with a book, his book, as often as not, was in that condition too.

His grandfather had complained more than once, 'You don't often come to Brackenhill, Percival, except to solve the problem of how little you can see of us in a given time.' He did not suspect it, but much of the strong attraction which drew him to his grandson lay in that very fact. The latter confronted him in grave independence, just touched with the courteous deference due from youth to age, but nothing more. Mr. Thorne would have thanked heaven had the boy been a bit of a spendthrift, but Percival was too wary for that. He did not refuse his grandfather's gifts, but he never seemed in want of them. They might help him to pleasant superfluities, but his attitude said plainly enough, 'I have

sufficient for my needs.' He was not to be bought—the very aimlessness of his life secured him from that. You cannot earn a man's gratitude by helping him onward in his course when he is drifting contentedly round and round. He was not to be bullied, being conscious of his impregnable position. He was not to be flattered in any ordinary way. It was so evident to him that the life he had chosen must appear an unwise choice to the majority of his fellow-men, that he accepted any assurance to the contrary as the verdict of a small minority. Nor was he conscious of any especial power or originality, so that he could be pleased by being told that he had broken conventional trammels, and was a great soul. Mr. Thorne did not know how to conquer him, and could not have enough of him.

It is needful to note how the day after the Agricultural Show was spent at Brackenhill.

Godfrey Hammond left by an early train. Mrs. Middleton came down to see about his breakfast with a splitting headache. The poor old lady's suffering was evident, and Sissy's suggestion that it was due to their having walked about so much in the broiling sun the day before was unanimously accepted. Mrs. Middleton countenanced the theory,

though she privately attributed it to a sleepless night which had followed a conversation with Hammond about Horace.

Percival vanished immediately after breakfast. As soon as he had ascertained that there were no especial plans for the day, he slipped quietly away with his hands in his pockets, strolled through the park, whistling dreamily as he went, and passing out into the road, crossed it, and made straight for the river. He lay on the grass for half-an-hour or so, studying the growth of willows and the habits of dragon-flies, and then sauntered along the bank. Had he gone to the left it would have led him past Langley Wood to Fordborough. He went to the right.

It was a gentle little river, which had plenty of time to spare, and amused itself with wandering here and there, tracing a bright maze of curves and unexpected turns. At times it would linger in shady pools, where, half-asleep, it seemed to hesitate whether it cared to go on to the county town at all that day. But Percival defied it to have more leisure than he had, and followed the silvery clue till all at once he found himself face to face with an artist who sat by the riverside, sketching.

The young man looked up with a half-

smile as Percival came suddenly upon him from behind a clump of alders. A remark of some kind, were it but concerning the weather, was inevitable. It was made, and was followed by others. Young Thorne looked, admired, and questioned, and they drifted into an aimless talk about the art which the painter loved. Even to an outsider, such as Percival, it was full of colour and grace, and a charm half understood; vaguely suggestive of a world of beauty—not far off and inaccessible, but underlying the common everyday world of which we are at times a little weary. It was as if one should tell us of virtue new and strange in the often turned earth of our garden-plot. Percival was rather apt to analyse his pains and pleasures, but his ideal was enjoyment which should defy analysis, and he found something of it that morning in the summer weather and his new friend's talk.

It was past noon. The young artist looked at his watch, and ascertained the fact. 'Do you live near here?' he asked.

Percival shook his head. 'I live anywhere. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth. But my grandfather lives in that grey house over yonder, and I am free to come and go as I choose. I am staying there now.'

'Brackenhill, do you mean? That fine old house on the side of the hill? I am lodging at the farm down there, and the farmer——'

'John Collins,' said Percival.

'Entertains me every night with stories of its magnificence. Since we have smoked our pipes together, I have learned that Brackenhill is the eighth wonder of the world.'

'Not quite,' said Thorne. 'But it is a good old manor-house, and, thank heaven, my ancestors for a good many generations wasted their money, and had none to spare for restoring and beautifying it. I don't mean my grandfather—he wouldn't hurt it. It's a quaint old place. Come some afternoon and look at it. He shall show you his pictures.'

'Thanks,' the other said, but he hesitated and looked at his unfinished work. 'I should like, but I don't quite know. The fact is, when I have done for to-day, I am to have old Collins' gig and drive into Fordborough, to see if there are any letters for me. I am not sure I shall not have to leave the first thing to-morrow.'

'And I have made you waste your time this morning.'

'Don't mention it,' said the young artist,

with the brightest smile. 'I'm not much given to bemoaning past troubles, and I shall be in a very bad way indeed before I begin to find fault with past pleasures. I may not find my letter after all, and in that case I should like very much to look you up. To-morrow?'

'Pray, do.' The tone was unmistakably cordial.

'Your grandfather's name is Thorne, isn't it? Shall I ask for young Mr. Thorne?'

'Percival Thorne,' was the quick correction. 'I have a cousin.'

They shook hands, but as Thorne turned away the other called after him: 'I say—is there any name to that little wood—out there, looking like a dark cloud on the green?'

'Yes—Langley Wood.' Percival nodded a second farewell, and went on his way pondering. And this was the subject of his thoughts:—

'Then, my brother, I have to go through Langley Wood to-morrow evening, and I am afraid to go alone.'

Of course he had not forgotten his promise to Addie, but having made his arrangements and worked it all out in his own mind, he had dismissed it from his thoughts. Now, however, it rose up before him as a slightly disagreeable puzzle.

What on earth did Addie want towards nine at night in Langley Wood? The day before, in haste to answer her request, and anxiety not to betray her, he had not considered whether the service he had promised to render were pleasant to him or not. In very truth he was willing to serve Addie, and he had professed his willingness the more eagerly that he had expected a harder task. She asked so slight a thing that only eager readiness could give the service any grace at all.

But when he came to consider it, he half wished that his task had been harder if it might have been different. He liked Addie, he was ready to serve her, but he foresaw possible annoyances to them both from her hasty request. He had no confidence in her prudence.

'Some silly freak of hers,' he thought, while he walked along, catching at the tops of the tall flowering weeds as he went. 'Some silly girlish freak. Why didn't she ask Horace? Wouldn't run any risk of getting him into trouble, I suppose.'

Did Horace know? he wondered. 'I'm not going to be made use of by him and her, they needn't think it!' vowed Percival in sudden anger. But next moment he smiled at his own folly. 'When I have given my

word, and must go if fifty Horaces had planned it! I had better save my resolutions for next time.' He did not think, however, that Horace *did* know. 'Which makes it all the worse,' he reflected. 'A charming complication it will be if I get into trouble with him about Addie. Suppose some one sees us! Suppose Mrs. Blake is down upon me, questioning, and I, pledged to secrecy, haven't a word to say for myself! Suppose Lottie . . . Oh, I say, a delightful arrangement this is, and no mistake!'

He could only hope that no one would see them, and that Addie's mystery would prove a harmless one.

He got in just as they were sitting down to luncheon. Horace and Sissy had spent the morning in archery and idleness, Mrs. Middleton in nursing her headache. Mr. Thorne was not there.

'Been enjoying a little solitude?' Horace inquired.

'Not much of that,' was the answer. 'A good deal of talk instead.'

'What, did you find a friend out in the fields?'

'Yes,' said Percival, 'a young artist.' As he spoke he remembered that he was ignorant of his new friend's name. At least he knew

it was 'Alf,' owing to some story the painter had told. 'I heard my brother calling "Alf! Alf!" so I,' &c. Alf—probably therefore Alfred—surname unknown.

They were half-way through their meal when Mr. Thorne came noiselessly in and took his accustomed place. He was very silent, and had a curiously intent expression. Horace, who was telling Sissy some trifling story about himself (Horace's little stories generally were about himself), finished it lamely in a lowered voice. Mr. Thorne smiled.

There was a silence. Percival went steadily on with his luncheon, but Horace pushed away his plate and sipped his sherry. The birds were twittering outside in the sunshine, but there was no other sound. It was like a breathless little pause of expectation.

At last Mr. Thorne spoke, in such sweetly-courteous tones that they all knew he meant mischief. 'Are you particularly engaged this afternoon?' he inquired of Horace.

'Not at all engaged,' said the young man. His heart gave a great throb.

'Then perhaps you could give me a few minutes in the library?'

'I shall be most'—Horace began. But he checked himself, and said, 'Certainly. When shall I come?'

‘As soon as you have finished your luncheon, if that will suit you.’

‘I have finished.’ He drank off his wine, and, without looking at the others, walked defiantly to the door, stood aside for his grandfather to pass, and followed him out.

Mrs. Middleton and Sissy exchanged glances. ‘Oh, my dear!’ the old lady exclaimed. ‘Oh, I am so frightened! I am afraid poor Horace is in trouble. Godfrey Hammond was saying only last night——’

She paused suddenly, looking at Percival. He sat with his back to the window, and the dark face was very dark in the shadow. It was just as well perhaps, for he was thinking ‘Told you so!’ a train of thought which seldom produces an agreeable expression.

‘What did Godfrey Hammond say?’ Sissy asked. But nothing was to be got out of Aunt Middleton, so they adjourned to the drawing-room to wait for Horace’s return. Percival read the paper, Mrs. Middleton lay on the sofa, Sissy flitted to and fro, now taking up a book, now her work, then at the piano playing idly with one hand, or singing snatches of her favourite songs. There was a mirror in which, looking sideways, she could see herself reflected as she played, and Percival as he read—as much of him at least

as was not swallowed up in the *Times*. There is something ghostly about a little picture like this reflected in a glass. It is so silent and yet so real; the people stir, look up, their lips move, they have every sign of life, but there is no sound. There are noises in the room behind you, but the people in the mirror make none. The *Times* may be rustling and crackling elsewhere, but Percival's ghost turns a ghostly paper whence no sound proceeds. Sissy is playing a little tinkling treble tune, but at the piano yonder, slim white fingers are silently wandering over the ivory keys, and the girl's eyes look strangely out from the polished surface.

Sissy gazed and mused. Perhaps some day Percival will reign at Brackenhill. And who will sit at that piano where the ghost-girl sits now, and what soundless melodies will be played in that silent room?

Sissy's left hand steals down to the bass, striking solemn chords. 'If one could but look into the glass,' she thinks, 'and see the future there, as people do in stories. What eyes would look out at me instead of mine? Ah, well! If I could but see Percival there I would try to be content, even if the girl turned away her face. I *would* be content. I would! I would!'

She turns resolutely away from the mirror and begins that old Royalist song in which yearning for the vanished past, and mourning for the dreary present, cannot triumph over the hope of far-off brightness, 'When the King enjoys his own again.' To Mrs. Middleton, to Percival, a mere song; to Sissy a solemn renunciation of all but the one hope. Let her king enjoy his own, and the rest be as fate wills.

The last note dies away. Moved by a sudden impulse, she lifts her eyes to the ghost Percival. He has lowered his paper a little, and is looking at her with a wondering smile. A voice behind her exclaims, 'Why, Sissy!' She darts across the room to the speaker, and pushes the *Times* away altogether. 'Percival,' she says in a low, breathless voice, 'does Miss Lisle play?'

'Miss Lisle!' He is surprised. 'Oh yes, she plays. But not as well as her brother, I believe.'

'And does she sing?'

'Yes. I heard her once. But no better than you sang just now. What has come to you, Sissy? You have found the one thing that was wanting.'

'What was that?'

'Earnestness—depth. You sang it as if

your soul and the soul of the song were one. Now I can tell you that I fancied you only skimmed over the surface of things—like a bird over the sea. I can tell you now since I was wrong.'

Her cheeks are glowing. 'And Miss Lisle?' she says.

'What, now, about Miss Lisle?' He is amused and perplexed at Sissy's persistence.

'She is one of your heroic women,' and Miss Langton nods her pretty head. 'Oh, I know! Jael, and *Judith*, and Charlotte Corday.'

'I don't think I said anything about Judith; surely *you* suggested her. And to tell you the truth, Sissy, I looked in the Apocrypha, and I thought I liked her the least of the trio. It wasn't a swift impulse like Jael's, who suddenly saw the tyrant given into her hands; and it wanted the grace of Charlotte Corday's utter self-sacrifice and quick death. Judith had great honour, and lived to be over a hundred, didn't she? I wonder if she often talked about Holofernes when she was eighty or ninety, and about her triumph—how she was crowned with a garland, and led the dance? She ran an awful risk, no doubt; but she was in awful peril—it was glory or death. Charlotte

Corday had no chance of a triumph; she must have known that success, as well as failure, meant the death-cart and the guillotine. Judith seems to have played her part fairly well to the end, I allow; but don't you think the praises and the after-life spoil it rather?'

Sissy, passing lightly over Percival's views about Charlotte Corday and the widow of a hundred-and-five who was mourned by all Israel, pounced on a more interesting avowal. 'So you looked Judith out and studied her? Oh, Percival!'

'My dear Sissy, shall I tell you how many times I have seen Miss Lisle?' He was answering her arch glance rather than her spoken question. 'How few times, I should say. Twice!'

'I've made up *my* mind about people when I've only seen them once,' said Sissy, apparently addressing the carpet.

'Very likely—some people have that power,' said Percival. 'Besides, seeing them once may mean that you had a good long interview under favourable circumstances. Now,' with a smile, 'shall I tell you all that Miss Lisle and I said to each other in our two meetings?' He paused, encountering Sissy's eyes, brilliantly and wickedly full of meaning.

'What! do you remember every word? Oh, Percival!'

'Hush!' said Mrs. Middleton, lifting her head from the cushion; 'listen! isn't that Horace?'

'I think so;' and Percival stooped for the *Times*, which had fallen on the floor. Sissy stood, with her hand on his chair, making no attempt to conceal her anxiety. The old lady noted her parted lips and eager eyes: 'Ah! she does care for Horace. I knew it, I knew it,' she thought.

He came in, looking white and angry; his mouth was sternly set, and there was a fierce spark in his grey eyes. Mrs. Middleton beckoned him to her sofa, and would have drawn the proud head down to her with a tender whisper of 'Tell me, my dear.' But the young fellow straightened himself, and faced them all as he stood by her side. She clasped and fondled his passive hand. 'What is the matter, Horace?' she said at last.

'As it happens, there is nothing much the matter,' he replied.

'You look as if a good deal might be the matter,' said Sissy.

He made no answer for the moment. Then he looked at her with a curious sort of smile: 'Sissy, when we were little—when

you were very little indeed—do you remember old Rover?’

‘That curly dog? Oh, yes!’

‘I used to have him in a string sometimes, and take him out; it was great fun,’ said Horace pensively. ‘I liked to feel him all alive, scampering and tugging at the end of the string. It was best of all, I think, to give him an unexpected jerk just when he was going to sniff at something, and take him pretty well off his legs—he was so astonished and disappointed. But it was very grand, too, if he would but make up his mind he wanted to go one way, to pull at him and *make* him go just the opposite. He was obstinate, was old Rover; but that was the fun of it. I was obstinate too, and the stronger. How long has he been dead?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know; twelve or thirteen years. Why?’

‘Is it as long as that? Well, I daresay it is. It has occurred to me to-day for the first time that perhaps it was rather hard on Rover now and then. Aunt Harriet, why did you let me have the poor old fellow and ill-use him?’

‘My dear boy! what *do* you mean? I don’t think you were ever cruel—not really cruel, you know. Children always will be

heedless, but I think Rover was fond of you.'

'I doubt it,' said Horace.

'But what do you mean?' The old lady was fairly perplexed. 'What makes you think of having poor old Rover in a string, to-day. I don't understand.'

'Which things are an allegory.' Horace looked more kindly down at the suffering face, and attempted to smile. 'It was very nice then, but to-day I'm the dog!'

'String pulled tight?' said Percival.

'Jerked!' He disengaged his hand. 'I think I'll go and have a cigar in the park.' Percival was going to rise, but Horace, as he passed, pressed his fingers on his shoulder: 'No, old fellow! not to-day—many thanks. You lecture me, you know, and generally I don't care a rap, so you are quite welcome. But to-day I'm a little sore, rubbed up the wrong way; I might take it seriously. Another time.'

And he departed, leaving his lecturer to reflect on this brilliant result of all his out-pourings of wisdom.

CHAPTER X.

IN LANGLEY WOOD.

AT Brackenhill they invariably dined at six o'clock, nor was the meal a lengthy one. Mr. Thorne drank little wine, and Horace was generally only too happy to escape to the drawing-room at the earliest opportunity. Percival could very well dine at home, and yet be true to his rendezvous in Langley Wood.

As the time drew near he became thoughtful, and, to tell the truth, a little out of temper. He liked his dinner, and Addie Blake interfered with his quiet enjoyment of it. He would have chosen to lie on the sofa in the cool, quaint, rose-scented drawing-room, and get Sissy to sing to him. Instead of which, he must tramp three miles along a dusty white road that July evening to meet a girl he didn't particularly want to see, and to hear a secret which he didn't much want

to know, and which he distinctly didn't want to be bound to keep. Decidedly a bore!

It was only twenty minutes past seven when they joined the ladies. Sissy represented the latter force, Aunt Middleton having gone to lie down in the hope of being better later in the evening. Mr. Thorne fidgeted about the room for a minute, and then went off to the library, whereupon Horace stretched himself with a sigh of relief. 'Come out, Sissy, and have a turn in the garden.'

'But, Percival,' she hesitated, 'what are you going to do?'

'Don't think about me; I must go out for a little while.' He left them on the terrace, and started on his mysterious errand. As he let himself out into the road by a little side gate of which he had pocketed the key, it was five-and-twenty minutes to eight. He had abundance of time. It was not three miles to the white gate into Langley Wood, a little more than three miles to the milestone beyond which he was on no account to go, and he had almost an hour to do it in. Nevertheless, he started on his walk like a man in haste.

The great Fordborough Agricultural Show lasted two days, and on the second the

price of admission was considerably reduced. It had occurred to Percival that the roads in every direction would probably be crowded with people making their way home—people who would have had more beer than was good for them. Addie would never think of such a possibility. It was true that the road from Fordborough which led past Brackenhill would be quieter than any other, but young Thorne was seriously uneasy as he strode along. It was also true that he met hardly anyone as he went, but even that failed to reassure him. ‘A little too early for them to have come so far, I suppose,’ was his comment to himself; ‘at any rate, she shall not wait for me.’

He passed the white gate, having encountered only a few stragglers, but before he reached the milestone he saw Addie Blake coming along the road to meet him.

She was flushed, eager, excited, and looked even handsomer than usual. Percival would never fall in love with Addie. That was very certain; but the certainty did not prevent a quick thrill of admiration which tingled through his blood as she advanced in her ripe dark beauty to meet him. By it, as by a charm, the service which had been

almost a weariness was transmuted to a happy privilege, and the half-reluctant squire became willing and devoted.

'You are more than punctual,' was greeting.

She smiled as she held out her hand. may say the same of you.'

'I was anxious,' he confessed. 'The roads are not likely to be very quiet to-day. And after sunset——'

'Yes,' said Addie. 'No doubt it seems strange to you that I should choose this day and this time——'

'I hardly know what I should have done if I had seen nothing of you when I reached the milestone,' he went on, interrupting himself. His curiosity was awakened now that he was so close to Addie's little mystery, but he was so anxious that she should not feel bound to tell him anything she would rather keep to herself, very anxious that she should understand that he would not pry into her secrets.

'If you had gone much further you would have missed me,' she said.

'Which way did you come?'

'I did not come straight from home. Do you see that little red house? I am drinking tea there, and spending a quiet evening

'How very pleasant!' said Perci

‘And who has the privilege of entertaining you?’

‘Mrs. Wardlaw. She is the widow of an officer—quite young. She is a friend of mine; she lives with an invalid aunt, an old Mrs. Watson.’

‘And what does Mrs. Wardlaw think of your taking a little’ stroll by yourself in the evening?’

‘Mrs. Wardlaw asked me there on purpose. Yesterday I saw her at the show, and gave her a little note as we shook hands. This morning came an invitation to me to go and drink tea there. I told mamma and Lottie I should go—papa is out—so one of the servants walked there with me at half-past six, and will call for me again at ten or a little after.’

‘Very ingeniously managed,’ said Percival. ‘And the invalid aunt?’

‘Went up to her room and left Mary and me to our devices,’ smiled Addie. ‘A delightful old lady—ah, here is the wood.’

‘We shall probably have this part of our walk to ourselves,’ Percival remarked, as he swung the gate open. ‘People going home from the show are not likely to stop to take a turn in Langley Wood.’

The sound of a rattling cart, and shouts

of discordant laughter, mixed with what was intended for a song, came along the road they had just quitted. Addie took a few hurried steps along the path, which curved enough to hide her from observation in a moment. Safe behind a screen of leaves, she paused. 'What horrible people! Is that a sample of what I may expect as I go back?'

'I fear so,' said Percival. 'I shall see you safe to Mrs. Wardlaw's door.'

'You shall see me safe, if you have good eyes,' she answered. 'But you will not go to the door with me.'

'Ah!' he said. 'Mrs. Wardlaw is only half trusted?'

Addie smiled. 'What people don't know they can't let out, can they?'

'Pray understand that you are quite at liberty to apply that very wise—mark me, that very wise—discovery of yours to my case,' said Thorne, looking straight at her. 'You talked about good eyes just now. Mine are good or bad as it suits me.'

At any rate they were earnest as they met hers.

'Don't shut them on my account,' said Addie. 'No, Percival; you are not like Mrs. Wardlaw. I mean to tell you all about it.'

But for a moment she did not speak. They were fairly in the wood; the trees were arching high above their heads; their steps were noiseless on the turf below; outside were warmth and daylight still, but here the shadows and the coolness of the night. A leathern-winged bat flitted across their path through the gathering dusk. 'They always look like ghosts,' said Addie. 'Doesn't it seem, Percival, as if the night had come upon us unawares?'

As she spoke they reached a little open space. The path forked right and left. 'Which way?' said Thorne.

'I don't know, I'm sure. There's a cottage on the further side of the wood, towards the river——'

'Is that your destination? To the right, then.' And to the right they went.

'When you promised to help me,' Addie began, 'do you remember what you said? I was to consider you as——' She paused, fixing her questioning eyes on him.

'As a brother. What then? Have I failed in my duty already?'

She shook her head, smiling. 'Percival, what do you think that means to me?'

'Ah, that's a difficult question. Of course we, who have no brothers, can only imagine,

we cannot know. But I have sometimes fancied that the idea we attach to the word brother is higher because no commonplace reality has ever stepped in to spoil it. For it is an evident fact that some people have brothers who are prosaic, and even disagreeable, while all the noble brothers of history and romance are ours. We may take Lord Tresham for our ideal (you remember Tresham in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'*?) and declare with him—

I think, am sure, a brother's love exceeds
All the world's love in its unworldliness.'

'Stop!' said Addie. 'You are going into the question much too enthusiastically, and much too poetically. I don't know anything about your Tresham. And you mustn't class me with yourself, "we who have no brothers"—I have one, Percival!'

'A brother? You have one? Why, I always fancied——'

'Well—a half-brother.' Addie made this concession to strict truth with something of reluctance in her tone, as if she did not like to own that her brother could possibly have been any nearer than he was. 'It is my brother I am going to meet to-night.'

Percival, fluent on the subject of brothers in general, was so astonished at the

idea of this particular brother or half-brother that he said 'Oh!'

'Papa married twice,' Addie exclaimed; 'the first time when he was very young. I don't think his first wife was *quite* a lady,' she said, lowering her voice as if the beeches might be given to gossiping.

Percival would not have been happy as a dweller in the Palace of Truth. He thought, 'Then Mr. Blake's two wives were alike in *one* respect.'

'And though Oliver was a dear boy,' she went on, 'he hasn't been very steady. He has had a good deal of money at one time or another, and wasted it, and he and mamma don't get on at all.'

'Ah—I daresay not.'

'Naturally she thinks more about Lottie and me; and Oliver has been very tiresome. He was to be in the business with papa, but he didn't do anything, and he got terribly into debt, and then he ran away and enlisted. Papa bought him off, and found him something else to do; but mamma was dreadfully vexed—she said it was a disgrace to the family.'

'Did he do better after that?'

'Not much,' Addie owned. 'In fact, I think he has spent most of his time since

then in running away and enlisting. I really believe he has been in a dozen regiments. We were always having to write to him, "Private Oliver Blake, Number so and so, C company, such a regiment." It didn't look well at all.'

(Addie, as she spoke, remembered how her mother used to sneer, 'No doubt some day you'll meet your *brother* in a red jacket, with a little cane, his cap very much on one side, and a tail of nursemaids wheeling their perambulators after him.' Such remarks had been painful to Addie, but even then she had felt that Mrs. Blake had cause to complain.)

'He was always bought off, I suppose?'

said Percival.

'Once papa declared he wouldn't. Oliver went on very quietly for a little while, and was to be a corporal. Then he wrote and said he was going to desert that day week, and he was afraid it might be very awkward for him afterwards, especially if he ever enlisted again, but he would take his chance sooner than stop. Papa knew he would do it, so he had to buy him off again.'

'But is this going on for ever?'

'No; for the last three years Oliver has been in dreadful disgrace, I don't exactly

know why, and we were not allowed to mention his name at home. But I don't care,' said Addie impetuously; 'if he were ever so foolish, and if he had enlisted in every regiment under the sun—he's my brother!'

'And Lottie? Does she stand by him as valiantly?'

'Oliver is nothing to Lottie; he never was. He is nine years older than she is, and when she would really begin to remember him he and mamma were always quarrelling. Besides, he always petted me—not Lottie. And now she despises him because he doesn't stick to anything, and get on. No—poor old Noll is *my* brother, only mine. No one else cares for him—except papa.'

'Mr. Blake hasn't given him up, then?'

'Oh, he is angry with Oliver when they are apart, but he always forgives him when they meet. He was really angry this last time, but Oliver wrote to him, and they made it up. Only my poor old Noll is to be sent over the sea to Canada with a man papa knows something of.'

'And this is good-bye? But surely they can't mind your meeting him before he goes?'

'They do,' said Addie. 'Papa and

mamma saw him in London ten days ago, and he was only forgiven on condition that he went away quietly, and said nothing to any one. As if he wasn't sure to tell me! Mamma knows how it has been before; she thinks if papa or I saw him alone, he might get round us, and then he wouldn't go. If he is steady, and does well there, he is to come and see us all in two years.'

'That isn't very long, is it?' said Percival cheerfully. It was evident to him that this black sheep would be much better away.

'Long! Oh no! Only, you see, Oliver *won't* do well, unless there's something very converting in Canadian air. So I may as well say good-bye to him; mayn't I? Mind, Percival, you are not to think he's wicked. He won't do anything dreadful. He'll spend all the money he can get, and then drift away somewhere.'

'A sort of Prodigal Son,' Thorne suggested.

'Yes. You won't understand him—how should you? You are always wise and well-behaved, and a credit to everyone—more like the son who stayed at home.'

'Not an attractive character,' was his reply. And he remembered Horace a few hours before. 'Not to-day, old fellow, you

lecture me, you know.' He was startled. 'Good heavens!' he thought. 'Am I a prig?'

Addie laughed. 'Well, I am trusting to you to understand *me* at any rate. Just like Oliver,' she went on, 'he came once, years ago, to stay with old Miss Hayward, who left us the house, and he knew something then of the man at this cottage, so he tells me to meet him there, without ever thinking how I should get to the place by myself at nine at night—Hush! what's that? Oh, Noll! Noll!'

A man's voice was heard at a little distance singing, and she darted forward, her eyes alight with joy. Percival followed, slackening his pace, and listening to Mr. Oliver Blake's rendering of 'Champagne Charlie is my name.' It ceased abruptly. He doubted what to do, took a step or two mechanically, and came suddenly out on the open space at the farther side of the wood, where was the cottage in question. Addie had run forward and forgotten him. He strolled with elaborate unconsciousness to some palings near by, turning his back on Addie and her brother, rested his folded arms there, and gazed at the placid landscape. Below ran the little stream by which

he had loitered in the morning, hurrying now in a straighter course, like an idle messenger who finds that time has fled much faster than he thought. The river mist hung white above the level meadows, and it seemed to Percival as if Nature, falling asleep, had glided into a pallid and melancholy dream. The last gleams of day were blending with a misty flood of moonlight, beneath which the world lay dwarfed and dark. On the horizon a little black windmill, with motionless sails, stood high against the sky, looking like a toy, as if a child had set it there and gone to bed.

To Percival, as he stood, came the sound, though not the words, of a rapid flow of talk, broken by a short, often-recurring laugh. But at last there was a pause, and the two came towards him. He turned to meet them, and saw in the moonlight that Oliver Blake was big and broad-shouldered, with black hair, curling thickly under a jaunty cap, and bright restless eyes. Addie had her arm drawn fondly through her brother's.

'Oliver,' she said, 'this is Percival; you have heard me speak of him.'

Oliver bent his head in a blunt, constrained way, and looked doubtfully at the other. Percival, who was going to extend

his hand, withheld it, and made a stately little bow in return.

‘That’s very magnificent,’ said Addie to him. ‘Why, Noll,’ she laughed, ‘you needn’t be so cautious. Percival knows. He is to be trusted.’

‘Ah?’ said Oliver. ‘What does that feel like, now?’

‘What does what feel like?’ said Thorne, as they shook hands. ‘Being trusted, do you mean?’

‘Ay. Being trusted, or being to be trusted. I don’t know either sensation, myself.’

‘Not likely, dear boy,’ said Addie, ‘with your way of going on. And yet Mr. Osborne must have trusted you, or how did you get the money and get away? You weren’t to have any till you sailed, were you?’

‘Would you like to know?’ said Oliver, his dark eyes twinkling. ‘I tried to persuade him—no good. Then I told him a—don’t be horrified—it was a very fine specimen of fiction——’

‘Oliver!’

‘Which is no doubt set down to the governor’s account.’

‘Did he believe you?’

‘Well, he didn’t know what to do. I don’t think he would have, only, if it wasn’t true, it was so stupendous, you see. He

hesitated, and that made him relax his watchfulness a little. So I gave him the slip; and pawned part of my outfit, which we bought together the day before.'

'You bad boy!'

'I left him a bit of a note. I told him that if he held his tongue, I would surely be there again to-morrow; we'd get the things, and no one would be any the wiser. But if he made a row, he might whistle for me, and catch me if he could.'

'And you don't know the effect of that, I suppose?' said Percival.

'Well, no. I read it over when I'd done, to try and judge it impartially. And I made up my mind—considering the character he'd had of me—that if I were Osborne I should say that Blake meant to back out of his bargain, with all he could lay his hands on, and was trying to secure two days' start. What do you think I did, Addie?'

'Something silly, I've no doubt.'

'Well,' he said, looking at her with an admiring gaze, which partly explained to Percival the secret of her fondness for her brother. '*I* thought it was rather clever. I just popped in the letter I had from you and your photograph; and, if that doesn't convince him, I give up!'

‘Oh, Noll! How *could* you? What is he like?’

Blake burst out laughing. ‘Listen to her! A man has got her photograph—he instantly becomes an interesting object. Oh! he isn’t a bad-looking fellow, Addie. I dare say he’s glaring at you now through his spectacles.’

‘Spectacles! Oliver, you’ve no business to go giving my photograph to all sorts of people. And I hate him too, because if it hadn’t been for him, perhaps you wouldn’t have been going away to Canada.’

‘What, then?’ said he philosophically. ‘Your mother would have had a dear friend on the point of starting for the Cannibal Islands.’

Percival began to feel a little anxious about time, and to wonder when the real leave-taking was to commence. He looked at his watch after the manner of a stage aside, and Addie took the hint.

Five minutes later she came towards him, with bent head and averted eyes. ‘I’m ready, Percival.’ But they had not gone a dozen steps when she sobbed, ‘Oh, my poor Noll!’ and rushed back. As young Thorne looked after her, he heard the quick spurt of a match. Oliver had turned on his heel already,

and was lighting his cigar. 'Heartless brute,' said Percival.

The verdict was unjust. Oliver had taken infinite pains to secure this glimpse of his sister; but since it was over, it *was* over. He loved her, and she knew it; but he was not the man to stand sentimentally staring at Addie's back as she disappeared into the shadows of Langley Wood. Now Percival could not have failed in such a matter, though he might have thought no more about it than did Oliver Blake.

When he and Addie were once more on their way, he occupied himself solely with the slight difficulties of her path, but before they had gone half-way she was making an effort to talk in her usual style, and succeeding fairly well. They were just at the place where the paths branched off, and Percival was stooping to disentangle her dress, which was caught on a bramble. As he raised himself he heard an approaching step, and quick as thought he laid his hand on Addie's arm. A couple of yards further and they would be in the one path, and must meet the new comer. Standing where they were, it was an even chance; he might pass them, or might go the other way. Addie stood breathless, and Percival's heart gave a quick

throb, more for Addie's sake than his own. But, after all, it might be no one who knew them, and in that dim light——

The moon glided with startling swiftness from behind a fleecy cloud, and shone on their white faces. The man, passing close by, started and stepped back, recovered himself with a muttered ejaculation, and said——

‘Fine evening, Mr. Thorne,’ as he passed.

‘Very,’ Percival replied. ‘Good night.’

The other returned a ‘Good night, sir,’ and disappeared in the twilight.

‘He knew you,’ said Addie. She looked frightened. Her parting from Oliver had unnerved her; difficulties which she had made light of in the happiness of anticipation seemed more formidable now. Standing there in the white moonlight and dim shadows of the wood, she suddenly realised the strange and doubtful aspect her expedition with Percival Thorne must wear to ordinary eyes. Nor was her companion likely to reassure her. An air of sombre resolution was more in his line than the light-hearted confidence which would have treated the whole affair as a trifle. He was, as Addie herself had called him, ‘well-behaved.’ She would have trusted him to the death, only just at that moment a little touch of happy recklessness would have

been a greater comfort to her than his anxious loyalty. But Percival could never be reckless; deliberately indifferent he might be, but reckless—never.

'He knew you,' said Addie, as they resumed their walk.

'Yes; but he would not know you. It does not signify much,' was Percival's reply.

'But he does know me.'

'Impossible! Oh, you mean he knows your name.'

She nodded. 'He often passes our house. Always on Thursday when a lot of people go by—isn't it a market somewhere?'

'Brookley market. Oh, yes; he would go there, no doubt.'

'Once or twice I have been walking on the road, and he has driven past; I know his face quite well, and I'm sure—I should think—he knows mine.'

'Very likely he may not have recognised you in this half-light,' said Percival.

She shivered. 'He did. I felt him look right through me.'

'Well, suppose he did. After all, there is no reason why we should not take a walk together on a summer evening if we like—is there?'

‘Where is he going?’ said Addie. ‘To the cottage?’

‘Oh dear, no! There are endless paths in the wood. He will turn off still more to the right; he cuts off a corner so going from Fordborough to his home.’

‘Who and what is he?’ was Miss Blake’s next question, as they emerged into the road.

‘Silas Fielding. He farms a little bit of old Garnett’s land, and I rather think he rents an outlying field or two of my grandfather’s. A horsey sort of fellow. I am not particularly fond of Mr. Silas Fielding,’ said Percival, and they walked a little way in silence.

‘You mustn’t come any further,’ said Addie. ‘Percival, I don’t know how to thank you.’

‘Don’t do it, then. I see no occasion.’

‘But I see occasion—very great occasion.’

‘Then we will consider it done,’ said Percival.

Mrs. Wardlaw’s house was very near. ‘I’m not late, am I?’ said Addie.

He looked at his watch. ‘A little more than a quarter to ten; very good time. I shall watch you along this last little bit of road, and see you let in. Good night.’

‘Good night.’ She went quickly away,

and he waited as he had promised. She looked back at him once, and saw him stand, dark and motionless, like a bronze statue. She reached the garden gate, and just as a farmer's gig with one man in it dashed past she ran up the little flight of steps, knocked, and was instantly admitted, as if Mrs. Wardlaw stood inside with her hand on the latch. Percival, seeing this, turned to begin his homeward walk, but as the gig rattled up to him its speed was slackened.

'Mr. Thorne! Isn't it Mr. Percival Thorne?'

It was the young artist driving back to the farm in Mr. Collins' old gig, and inducing Mr. Collins' old horse to go at a headlong pace. 'I thought it was you standing in the moonlight,' he said. 'Can't I give you a lift?'

Percival accepted, and they started off, if possible, more vehemently than before.

'I must look sharp,' explained the young man, whose name was Alf, 'or I shall be late at the farm.'

'You have only just come from Fordborough?' said Percival.

'No. I put up the horse and stayed later than I meant. I'd no idea that dull little hole of a town could wake up so. Why, it is flapping with flags from one end to the other.'

I never saw such a lot of tramps and drunken men in my life.'

'Charming idea you have of waking up.'

'And brass bands—and gipsies,' the other went on. 'When I wanted to come away, the ostler was drunk, and couldn't find the horse, and I couldn't find the gig—that is, I could find a score all exactly like this one, but as to knowing which of all the gigs in the yard belonged to old Collins—I couldn't have told to save my life.'

'You got it at last, I suppose?' said Thorne.

The other was cautious. 'Well, I got *this*. The man put the horse in somehow, and then, he was so far gone, he began to talk to himself and undo the harness again. I believe he thought he'd put in a pair by mistake, and was trying to take one out. However, I stopped that, and got away after a fashion.'

'They are early birds at the farm, no doubt.'

'Early? Rather! At half-past nine old Collins creaks upstairs, and Mrs. Collins goes into the kitchen and rakes out the cinders for fear of fire. I was out late one night last week, and she couldn't wake the old man up to let me in. It was twenty minutes to eleven!'

'Did she come herself?' said Percival. 'I know Mrs. Collins by daylight; but I can't imagine Mrs. Collins aroused from her first sleep.'

"Where ignorance is bliss." The dear old lady kept me on the door-step for ten minutes or so, while she was trying to make up her mind whether she would keep her nightcap on or whether she would take it off and put on the light brown front she ordinarily wears. At last she made up her mind to retain the nightcap, and add the front by way of a finish. But I have it on her own authority that she was flurried, and all of a shake, so she didn't carry out her idea skilfully. The cap was half off, and the front was only half on. I saw her forehead getting lower and lower as she spoke to me.'

'Could she ever forgive you for seeing her so?'

'Oh, yes. I'm rather a favourite, I think. She beamed on me just the same the next morning.'

'She did?' said Thorne. 'A wonderful woman!'

'I think I shall ask her for a lock of her chestnut hair to-morrow, before I go, to show that my faith in it is—well, as implicit as ever. Ah! by the way, I got my letter. I thought

most likely I should. I leave the first thing in the morning.'

'Sorry to hear it,' said Percival. But it occurred to him that the artist's departure would prevent any talk the next day of the circumstances of their meeting that evening. He jumped down, with hasty thanks to his new friend when they came to the little gate. 'You'll be in a ditch, if you don't look out!' he called after him.

'All right!' was shouted back, and old Collins' gig vanished into the outer darkness, with the young artist, whom Percival Thorne has never chanced to meet again to this day.

He let himself in with his key, and hurried up to the house. The door which opened on the terrace was unfastened as usual. The lights were burning in the drawing-room, but no one was there, and the bright vacant room had a strange ghostly aspect, a little island of mellow radiance in the vast silence and darkness of the night. He felt like one in a dream, and stood idly thinking of the young painter rattling in old Collins' gig to Willow Farm; of Silas Fielding striding across the meadows, with thoughts intent on his bargains; of Oliver Blake turning in with a yawn when his cigar was done; of Addie, forcing back her unshed tears, and hiding deep in her heart

the well-spring of her tenderness for her poor Noll. He had not done justice to Addie Blake. Something of the feeling of underlying beauty, unsought or ignored, which he gained from his artist friend's talk in the morning, had come to him in a slightly altered form with Addie that evening. With Alf, it was the every-day world which revealed new beauty; with Addie it was shown in what Percival had taken for a prosaic and commonplace character. He found himself wondering whether he might not have failed to do justice to others besides Addie. He had looked far away for his ideal, and had found a fair faint dream, when it might be that the reality was close at hand. Since the wayside had blossomed with unexpected loveliness, what grace, and charm, and hidden treasure might be his prize, who should win his way into the fenced garden of Sissy's sweet soul!

He started from his reverie, and was surprised to find that it had lasted only two or three minutes; it seemed to him as if he had been dreaming a long while in that bright loneliness. He walked to the window, with 'Where can they all be?' on his lips. And for an answer to his question, standing at the far end of the terrace was Sissy. As he hurried through the hall to join her, the library

door opened an inch or two, and a voice inquired,

‘Who is that?’

‘It is I—Percival,’ he answered in haste.

At the word ‘Percival’ the door opened wider, and Mr. Thorne looked out.

‘Oh! where is Sissy?’

‘On the terrace.’

‘And Horace?’

‘I don’t know,’ still chafing to be gone.

‘Sissy ought to come in. It’s a quarter-past ten.’ He looked up at the great hall clock. ‘Yes; a quarter-past ten, and she will be catching cold.’

‘I’ll tell her.’

‘Did you come in for a shawl for her? Take her one—anything.’

‘I will,’ and Percival made a dash at the row of pegs, and caught down the first thing which looked moderately like a cloak. Then he escaped.

Sissy was coming to the house, but so leisurely that the journey was likely to take her a considerable time. ‘At last,’ she said, as he came up to her. ‘Why, which way—oh, it’s *you*, Percival!’

‘You thought I was Horace,’ he said, as he put the cloak round her.

'Yes, for the moment I did. What are you muffling me up like this for?'

'Orders,' said Percival. 'My grandfather said you were to come in, and that I was to bring you a shawl.'

'What is the good of this thing, if I'm to go in?'

'Very sensibly put. Evidently no good at all. So we will turn round, and go to the end of the terrace and back, unless you are tired.'

She was not tired.

'And you took me for Horace? I always said we were alike.'

'You are not a bit alike.'

'Oh, no! Of course not.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Sissy. 'Anybody's like anybody if it's pitch dark, and they don't speak.'

'I rather suspect Horace and I might be alike if it were a half-light, and if we *did* speak,' said Percival. 'Remember the photograph. But where is Horace all this time? What have you been doing with yourself?'

'He's somewhere about,' said Sissy. 'First of all, we had a little croquet. Then it got too dark to play, so I went to see after Aunt Harriet. Her head was worse; so she said she would go to bed.'

‘Poor old lady! Best thing she could do. She’ll be better to-morrow, I hope.’

‘Then Horace and I thought we would go and look up his old nurse. She has been teasing me ever so long, wanting to see “Master Horace,” and it’s only across a couple of fields. But she wasn’t at home, and the cottage was shut up.’

‘Gone to Fordborough for the day, most likely.’

‘I daresay. She has a niece there. Then we came back, and Horace didn’t much want to go in, because of this afternoon, you know, so we stayed in the long walk, and he smoked and we listened to the nightingales.’

‘Very delightful,’ said Percival. ‘The long walk and the nightingales, I mean.’

‘And then there was a little pinkish light in the sky, and he thought there was a fire somewhere. So he went into the park, to get a better view; and after I had waited for him a little while, I came up here and met you.’

A quick step was heard on the gravel behind them.

‘Oh, here you are!’ said Horace. ‘The fire doesn’t seem to be anything, Sissy, after all. The light got fainter and fainter, and it’s all gone now.’

'Where did you think it was?' Percival inquired.

'Well, I thought from the direction that it must be at old Garnett's Upland Farm, but it can't have been much. So you have got back?'

'Yes. Hadn't we better go in? You must mind what you are about, Horace, though it is warm. That cough of yours—'

'Stuff and nonsense about my cough.' But he turned to go in, nevertheless.

'By the way,' said Percival, as he walked between them, 'you've been out all the evening—does anyone know I've been away?'

'No,' said Sissy. 'Why; don't you want—'

'I would rather they didn't,' he replied. (The stars in their courses seemed to fight for Addie and her secret, had it not been for that untoward meeting with Silas Fielding.)

Horace wore a knowing expression. He was rather pleased that his lecturer should be compelled to seek a pledge of secrecy from him. It made him feel more on a level with the well-conducted and independent Percival. 'All right,' he said.

'You may trust me,' in a softly earnest voice on the other side.

‘Thank you both,’ said Percival, but his eyes thanked Sissy.

‘What have you been after?’ asked Horace. ‘I thought most likely you were off to the friend you met this morning.’

The astonishing way in which circumstances conspired to aid in guarding the mystery! ‘I have been with him,’ said Percival.

(We value the opinion of others too much very often for our own peace. Queer, unsubstantial things those opinions often are. ‘I have been with him.’ Sissy felt a little glow of kindliness towards the unknown; it might have been, ‘I have been with her.’ She was prejudiced in his favour, and sure that he was a nice fellow. Horace was ready to stake something on his conviction that he was a bad lot, this fellow Percy had picked up, and that Percy knew it.)

Percival was still warm with the chivalrous devotion which had been kindled in him that evening. It was reserved for the colder morning light to reveal to him that what with Lottie on the hillside, and Addie in Langley Wood, he was plunging into little adventures which were hardly consistent with the character of a most prudent young man. Yet such was the character he was supposed

to have undertaken to support in the world's drama.

They reached the door, and Horace went in, but Sissy lingered yet a moment on the threshold. 'Isn't it all beautiful?' she said, taking one more look; 'if it could only last!'

Percival smiled. 'Sissy, have *you* learnt that?'

'November — bare boughs and bitter winds—I hate to think of it,' she said.

'I would say, "don't think of it," but it would be no good,' he replied. 'When the thought of change has once occurred to you while you look at a landscape, it is a part of every landscape thenceforward. But it gives a bitter charm.'

'Spring will come again,' she said; 'but death and parting, and loss—they are so dreadful. And growing old—oh, Percival, why must they all be?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'The whole world echoes your "Why?" Sissy, I wish I could help you, but I can't. I can only tell you that I understand what you feel. It is very terrible looking forward to age, to loss of powers, hopes, and friends. One feels sometimes as if one could not tread that long grey road to the grave.'

Sissy shivered as if she saw it drawn out before her eyes.

‘But after all it may be brighter than we think,’ he went on, after a pause. ‘There is joy and beauty in change as well as bitterness. If everything in the world were fixed and unalterable, would not that be far more terrible? As it is, we have all the possibilities on our side. Who knows what gladness may grow out of endless change?’ Yet, even as he spoke, he was conscious of a wild, impotent longing to snatch her—she was so delicate and sweet—from beneath the great revolving wheels of time, with a cry of—

Stay as you are, and be loved for ever.

But the poet’s very words carry the sentence of doom in the memory that the blossom to which they were uttered must have perished years ago.

‘Sissy,’ he said suddenly, ‘surely there cannot be much suffering reserved for you! Oh, poor child, I wish I could take it all in your place!’ He spoke in all earnestness, yet could he have looked into the future he would have seen that her suffering would not be long, but very keen, and his not to bear, but to inflict.

CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE.

PERCIVAL THORNE had never thought much on the subject of revenge. He rather took it for granted that deliberate revenge was an extraordinary and altogether exceptional thing. People give way to bursts of passion, which pass away and leave no trace ; they are so hot with fury which comes to nothing at all, that at the first glance it seems as if the anger which bears fruit must be something different in kind. But it is possible that if Percival had considered the matter, he might have arrived at the conclusion that revenge does not depend only on intensity of passion, but on intensity of passion and aptness of opportunity together. Disembodied hate soon dies, unless it is fiendish in its strength.

He had had fair warning at the birthday party. Lottie, smarting with humiliation, had looked him full in the face with a flash

of such bitter enmity as springs from the consciousness of one's own folly. And Lottie's eyes conveyed their meaning well. That very afternoon, when Percival looked up, as he lay on the turf at her feet, they had been most eloquent of love. 'Foolish child !' he had thought, 'she is only seventeen to-day, and childish still.' When he encountered the sudden flash of hate, he would hardly have been surprised at some instant manifestation of it. Had she carried a dagger, like

Our Lombard country girls along the coast,

vengeance might have come at once. But she spoke to him later in her ordinary voice, and touched his hand when she bade him good night ; and it was only natural to conclude that nothing would follow her glance of fury. Something of bitterness might linger for awhile, but Lottie was only seventeen, and that afternoon she had loved him.

He was right enough. There was nothing fiendish in Lottie's hatred ; it would soon have spent its strength in helpless longings and died. But that very night it flew straight to Horace Thorne, and unobserved found shelter there. It assumed a shape, not clearly defined as yet, but a shape which time would surely reveal. It drew Lottie to the young

man's side, while the tears of pain and shame were hardly yet dry upon her burning cheeks.

In spite of the talk on her birthday morning, Lottie hardly understood the relative positions of the Thornes. Percival was disinherited, and Horace was the heir. Naturally she supposed that Horace was the favourite, and that the old man was displeased with Percival. She concluded that the small income of which the latter had spoken was probably a grudging allowance from Mr. Thorne. His grandfather protected and patronised him now, and no doubt it would be in Horace's power to protect and patronise him hereafter. Lottie hardly knew what she dreamed or wished, but she felt that she should indeed be avenged if the dole might in any way be regulated by her caprice, given or withheld according to the mood of the moment.

Meanwhile, Percival drifted contentedly on, unconscious that Lottie had vowed vengeance, and Sissy devotion. Mr. Thorne went about with an air of furtive triumph, as if he were tasting the sweetness of having outwitted somebody. Horace divided his time between divers pleasures, but contrived to run down to Fordborough once just before

he went yachting with a friend. He took to letter-writing with praiseworthy regularity, and yet his accustomed correspondents were curiously unaware of his sudden energy. He too had his look of triumph sometimes, but it was uneasy triumph, as if he were not absolutely certain that someone might not have outwitted him. Oliver Blake on board the good ship 'Curlew,' had passed the period of sea-sickness, and was flirting desperately with a lively fellow passenger, while Addie followed him with anxious thoughts. About this time his father went in secret to consult a London doctor, and came away with a grave face, and a tender softening of his heart towards his only son. A visit to his lawyer ensued, and of this also Mrs. Blake knew nothing. The girls played croquet as before, Lottie won the ivory mallet on the great field-day of the Fordborough club, and Mrs. Rawlinson and Miss Lloyd hated her with their sweetest smiles. Week after week of glorious weather went by. Brackenhill lay stretched in the sleepy golden sunshine, and the leaves in Langley Wood, quivering against the unclouded blue, had lost the freshness of the early summer. The shadows and the sadness were to come.

CHAPTER XII.

Well, what's gone from me?

What have I lost in you?

R. BROWNING.

PERCIVAL awoke one day to the consciousness that the world was smaller, greyer, and flatter than he had supposed it. At the same moment he became aware that a burden was lifted from his shoulders, and that a disturbing element was gone out of his life.

This is how the change in the universe was effected. Percival met Godfrey Hammond, and they talked of indifferent things. As they were parting, Hammond looked over his shoulder, and came back.

'I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. Have you heard that the young lady with the latent nobility in her face is going to be married?'

'What young lady?' said Percival, stiffly. He knew perfectly well, and Hammond knew that he knew.

‘Miss Lisle.’

‘No. I hadn’t heard. Who is he?’

‘The happy man? Lord Scarbrook’s eldest son.’

‘Who told you?’

‘You are incredulous, but I fear I can’t soften the blow. The man who told me heard Lisle talking about it.’

‘There’s no blow to soften,’ said Thorne. ‘I assure you, I don’t feel it.’

‘Ah,’ said Hammond, ‘there was once a man who didn’t know that his head had been cut off till he sneezed—wasn’t there? Take great care of yourself, Percival.’ And, nodding a second farewell, Godfrey left him, and Percival went on his way through that curiously shrunken world.

And after all the blow was premature. Mr. Lisle had only talked of a probability which he earnestly hoped would be realised.

But Percival did not doubt it. He tried to analyse his feelings as he walked away. He had known but little of Judith Lisle, but, when first he saw her face, he felt that the vague dream, which till then had approached, only to elude him, in clouds, in fire, in poems, in flowers, in music, had taken human shape and looked at him out of her grey eyes.

Percival had no certain assurance that she *was* his ideal, but from that time forward he pictured his ideal in her guise.

He did not dream of winning her. Mr. Lisle had boasted to him one evening, as they sat over their wine, of all that he meant to do for his daughter, and of the great match he hoped she would make. Percival had a feeling of peculiar loyalty to Mr. Lisle, as the friend whom his dead father had trusted most of all. He could not think of Judith, for he could never be a fit husband for her in Mr. Lisle's eyes. Had he been heir to Brackenhill — But he was not.

So he acquiesced, patiently enough. He did not attempt to do anything. What was there to do? By the time that he had struggled through the crowd, and got his foot on the first round of that ladder which *may* lead to fortune, Judith would probably be married. He did not even know certainly that she was the woman he wanted to win. Why should he force the lazy stream of his existence into a rough and stony channel, that he might have a chance—infinitesimally small—of winning her?

Yet there were moments of exaltation, when it seemed to him as if his acquiescence were tame and mean, as if his life would miss

its crown, unless he could attain to his ideal. At such moments he felt the stings of shame and ambition. Yet what could he do? The mood passed, and left him drifting onward as before.

But now all thought of Judith Lisle was over. Even if she were in truth his ideal woman, it was certain that she was no longer within his reach. That haunting possibility was gone. All that it had ever done for him was to make him dissatisfied with himself from time to time, and yet he found himself regretting it.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWS.

IN the early autumn there was sorrow in the little white house at Fordborough. Mr. Blake died suddenly ; and after his death it appeared that he had known of his danger, and made ready for the end. He had carried his terrible secret in his heart, and worn a smile on his face, and kissed his girls, and noticed how the acacia and the laburnums were growing, and rated John the gardener, who was drunk one evening, when he came to shut up the bright little conservatory. He read the reports of Mr. Gladstone's speeches with his usual care, made his usual jokes, and never uttered a word that was not altogether prosaic and commonplace. And at last he passed away quite quietly, as if he had a business appointment with Death. It was not heroism, but it seemed a little like it, this calmness in facing the inevitable mystery

in the midst of that unconscious little circle.

There was sorrow in the little villa, but there was bitterness too. Mr. Blake's will was not to be disputed, but his widow could find no words too strong to condemn it. It had been made when his heart was softened towards his son. He had provided for his wife and daughters, but Oliver's share was larger. Mrs. Blake could not forgive this, nor could she pardon the dead man that the earnings of his life were less than she had calculated, and as soon as she could she left Fordborough.

Mother and daughters travelled together no farther than to London. There Addie went to her father's sister, to await Oliver's return from exile; and Mrs. Blake and Lottie started for Folkestone, talking of choosing some quiet place on the Continent, where they might spend the winter.

If there was sorrow at the little white villa, there was bitter trouble at Brackenhill. The slow weeks wore away beneath an overhanging cloud, whose sullen gloom might at any moment be broken by a fatal flash. It was not difficult to say what was the matter with Horace that autumn. A neglected cold, a terrible cough, a hurried consultation of

doctors, a sentence of banishment or death—poor Horace! Mrs. James Thorne went abroad with her son, and Aunt Harriet came back from town, almost heart-broken.

But what was amiss with Sissy? She went about the old house with drooping head and listless step. The delicate colour fled slowly from her face, and left a cheek pale as a tea-rose. A word, a look, would send her hand to her heart. She was restless and anxious, and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. Any remark on her low spirits was met with a sudden gaiety as like her old gladness as fireworks are like sunshine. She declared that her appetite was good, and indeed she sometimes ate with an eager craving, very unlike a healthy hunger. She persisted that she slept even better than usual, and it was true that her eyes unclosed more reluctantly when morning came; but Aunt Harriet was sure that hours of wakeful tossing ended in the heavy slumber of exhaustion. 'If one eats well and sleeps well,' said Sissy, 'there's not much amiss. You are dear kind people; but oh, what nonsense you do talk!'

Mr. Thorne said, 'The child is fretting about Horace.' But this explanation did not satisfy Mrs. Middleton. The first symptoms

of Sissy's mysterious malady had preceded Horace's peril, and she said so.

'I know,' Mr. Thorne replied, nodding his head. 'All the same; Horace is at the bottom of it. You don't understand. You can't. Well, I'll see what I can do.'

'For Horace? If you get the chance,' said Mrs. Middleton bitterly. 'Oh, Godfrey, I sometimes think that neither you nor I shall do much more for Horace and Sissy!'

Mr. Thorne's sudden ejaculation was like an angry snap. He poked the wood fire furiously, till the sparks went up the chimney in a fierce stream, then, poker in hand, he looked up at the old lady's melancholy face.

'How can you stand there and talk such folly? This isn't the first time the boy has been ill—he'll come back to you all right in the spring. Of course he will! He *must*!' This with another assault on the big log.

'I wish I dared think so,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'But I was dreaming of poor Jim last night—you sent him away just the same, and——'

'And he came back strong and obstinate enough to insist on making a fool of himself in spite of me—just as Horace will—see if he doesn't!' was the quick reply. 'And you know what a poor, puny fellow Jim was.

Don't talk rubbish! Sissy too! As if girls didn't always have their little imaginary ailments! She isn't going to die—not she!'

'Imaginary!' said Mrs. Middleton. It was only one word, but the tone spoke volumes.

'Yes, imaginary,' her brother repeated. 'I tell you she is not ill. She is unhappy about Horace. I must have a little talk with her.'

'If she is fretting about Horace——' said Mrs. Middleton, as she went away.

Her brother got up and unlocked a drawer in his writing-table. He took out a folded paper and looked at it, without attempting to open it; merely to hold it in his hand gave him a sense of power. Formidable as it looked, it was nothing—not worth the paper it was written on—unless, indeed, he touched the bell, which was within easy reach, summoned a couple of servants, and put that formal trembling signature of his at the end. Then that blue paper would be worth—Brackenhill.

He handled it, laid it down, eyed it from a distance, walking softly to and fro, came near again, and stood looking at it.

'What would Hardwicke say?' And the thought of that respectable lawyer, astonished

and discomfited, made Mr. Thorne smile, as he did sometimes, with one side of his mouth only. He took another turn, and came back.

‘He’d say that three generations of Hardwickses were trusted by the Thornes, till old Godfrey Thorne had a job to do he was ashamed of, and took it to Mitchell of Stoneham.’

Yet another turn, and another halt.

‘He shan’t say it. He shall make the will himself. He shall never say that I was ashamed of doing justice to Percival. He shall do it—not just yet, with Horace ill and away—but it shall be done.’

For a moment he looked half inclined to throw Mr. Mitchell’s work on the fire, but he ended by locking it in the drawer again. ‘I won’t sign it,’ he said. ‘There would be endless talk if I made any alteration in my will just now, and I shouldn’t care to do it either. But it shall lie there till I can go to Hardwicke. I shall be happier knowing that five minutes will make all right, if there should be any need.’

Under these thoughts lay the consciousness that there might be no need whatever for the will. The contempt with which he treated Mrs. Middleton’s forebodings was not as real as he wished it to be. He felt

the loneliness of his position very keenly, and was aghast at the widening circle of death in which he stood, as if his existence were charmed. He was almost ready to believe that his own life flourished in some subtle atmosphere which was deadly to those around him. He was strong and well, conscious of no failure or decay from year to year; and the bright young lives which had grown up in his shadow had passed away, or were passing now. He shivered at the thought of his horrible solitude as he warmed his veined hands at the blaze. He had gloried in his power over Horace and Brackenhill, and now Horace was gliding out of his reach into the shadows. He had plotted against the lad; yet it was dreadful to think that the bright, handsome fellow, who shot so well and rode so fearlessly, and made friends wherever he went, should be beyond all services but those of a nurse for a little while, and then of the grave-digger and the parson, and should not care for any landed estate, except the seven-foot one which Harold Godwinsson offered to his foe. No one had such cause for thinking ill of Horace as had old Mr. Thorne; but he was sorry for the boy, as he sat by the fireside, and the more sorry because he felt himself a conqueror.

Thank God, he had Percival still! No sorrow could cut him to the heart while Percival remained—Percival, who had never known what a day's illness meant; who was almost as independent of him in his prosperity as was Horace in the shadow of death—almost, but not quite. He could make Percival a rich man yet, and he would do it.

His soul was filled with a great longing to look on his boy's face then and there. He felt as if his dreams of death and loneliness would vanish if he might but touch the hand whose soft, strong grasp he knew so well. Percival had very beautiful hands, firm, smooth, olive-skinned—the hands of an idle man. 'Ah! they shall never have any need to work,' smiled Mr. Thorne, as he held his own to the fire. And though Percival was indifferent to many of the things which young men generally enjoy, he had some tastes which his grandfather could gratify. Dick Garnett had said that there was some pleasure in giving that young fellow a good glass of wine—he knew when he had one; and a dinner too—he could dine, not merely feed. Old Garnett considered that most people, and especially young people, took what they supposed was needful to support existence, in an ignorant manner which was beneath contempt.

But Percival was an exception to this rule, and Mr. Thorne found pleasure in recalling Garnett's verdict. True, these tastes and enjoyments were material, low ; but if he could not apprehend Percival in his nobler desires, it was something to seize him thus. Let the boy put on his tragic, musing face and air of unfathomable mystery—let him roam where he would in dreams—he must needs come home to dinner. And if behind that somewhat romantic exterior lurked a budding epicure, a connoisseur when priceless vintages should be in question, would he not think kindly of the old man who should save him from many a day of hashed mutton and cheap sherry ?

Arriving at this point in his meditations, Mr. Thorne smiled again, and went in search of Sissy. He found her curled on the rug in the drawing-room, with a novel in her hand. As he approached, she gathered up all her energies and smiled.

'Sissy !' he said, abruptly, 'are you fretting about Horace ?'

The words were simple enough, but in her quick reply, 'I ? O no, no !' the girl seemed rather to answer a meaning which lay beneath the surface.

He shook his head. 'I fear you are.'

‘No, indeed, no. I’m sorry he’s so ill—poor Horace!’

‘Of course you are. That grieves us all, but I didn’t mean fretting about his illness only.’

‘I know,’ said Sissy. ‘There is nothing else, really.’

‘Are you quite certain?’ said the old man gently. ‘Surely you might tell me?’

‘There’s nothing to tell,’ she persisted.

‘You are not unhappy because you feel as if you had betrayed him? It was best to tell the truth, Sissy, but perhaps I should not have asked you; I don’t want you to suffer.’

‘I’m not fretting about that,’ she said hurriedly, ‘indeed I am not. You must do what you like. You know best.’

‘He has been to blame—very much to blame,’ said Mr. Thorne. ‘And of course these people are a designing lot. I daresay Miss Blake met him more than half-way—’

Sissy was fingering the tassel which hung from a cushion near her hand. ‘Very likely,’ she said, looking at it absently. ‘Very likely, indeed.’

Mr. Thorne nodded. ‘I suspect she will think twice about it now. But it is his deceit I cannot forgive,’ he went on, after a moment, ‘his word solemnly, voluntarily pledged to me, and broken before the day was done!’

'Yes,' said Sissy.

'You feel the same? Speak frankly, my dear, I want to be just, but we mustn't break your heart in our quarrels.'

'You won't,' she said. 'Please do what you think right, and don't mind me. I would much rather you decided it—I would indeed.' She rested her cheek on her curved arm as if she were tired. 'Don't think about me at all, please.'

Mr. Thorne stood looking down at her, with a new perplexity on his face. 'But, Sissy,' he said, 'if you are *not* fretting about Horace, what is amiss with you?'

As he spoke the door at the far end of the room opened, and a servant announced that Mr. Garnett was outside. He wanted to speak to Mr. Thorne for a moment, but would not get off his horse. The old man went. When the door closed behind him, Sissy sat up. Her lips were white, her hands trembled. 'He'll find me out some day, and he'll be *so* angry! Oh, and Horace! I shall never be a heroine—never. Judith wouldn't have been frightened at such a little bit of a secret. If they scold me, what shall I do? No one ever has scolded me, and I couldn't bear it—I know I couldn't.'

She rocked herself to and fro, with her

little hands tightly clasped, and her melancholy eyes fixed on the empty air. 'Poor Horace!' she said to herself. Then she was still, as if she were trying to find some little shred of courage somewhere in her heart. 'It is all for Percival,' she whispered at last; 'for Percival—Percival.' And across her face there passed the pale remembrance of a smile.

CHAPTER XIV.

GODFREY HAMMOND PRESCRIBES.

GODFREY HAMMOND paid a flying visit to Brackenhill, and was startled at the signs of Sissy's illness. 'What is amiss?' he asked. Mrs. Middleton shook her head.

'Can't you find out? *Something* is wrong—she is literally pining away.'

'I know it.'

'Won't she tell you?'

'She persists that there is nothing whatever the matter with her.'

'Have you had a doctor?'

'She won't see one, but I spoke to Dr. Grey about her. He said "Try cod-liver-oil," but she won't touch it.'

'Cod-liver-oil! the man's an idiot,' and Godfrey Hammond walked off, with a thoughtful frown.

He watched his opportunity, and caught Sissy in the library the next afternoon. Mr.

Thorne was safely shut up in his study with his agent ; Mrs. Middleton had gone into the village to see a sick woman, so Hammond had it all to himself. Sissy was turning the pages of a magazine, and there was silence for a minute, while he skimmed a column of the *Times*. Then she looked up, suddenly conscious that his eyes were fixed on her.

‘ I am sorry to see you are not looking so well as usual,’ he said.

‘ There’s nothing the matter with me, really.’

‘ Pardon me but I think there is.’

‘ No, indeed, no ! Why I have *such* an appetite—sometimes’ (seeing Hammond’s quick glance and arching brows), ‘ and I sleep so well, it’s quite a trouble to get up. And if I eat well, and sleep well,’ said Sissy, clinging to her poor little formula, ‘ there *can’t* be very much the matter with me, you know.’

‘ H’m !’ said Godfrey. ‘ Mr. Thorne and Mrs. Middleton are rather inclined to agree with *me*, I think.’

He sat on the arm of a chair, swinging one foot with an affectation of carelessness, which his watchful eyes belied. They were light grey, and not very noticeable in themselves, but half that intensity of expression would have made eyes like Lottie’s

absolutely burn. Sissy came and knelt on the seat of the chair, and looked up at him with an anxious face.

'They always agree with you,' she said, with innocent flattery. 'You can make them think just what you like. Do tell them not to mind me. I should be quite well, if they would only let me alone, I should indeed. I am telling you the truth. Oh, don't you know I am telling you the truth? Don't let them tease me any more.'

'Then, Sissy, you must get well, you know,' said Hammond; and as he spoke he put his left arm round the girl's waist. He had been a young man at Brackenhill when Sissy was a tiny child, and many a time had she sat on his knee and kissed him. But when she grew up he had dropped the familiar 'Sissy' in speaking to her, fancying that it sounded paternal, and as if he were very old indeed. He could not address her as 'Miss Langton,' but he had carried the art of speaking to her without using any name at all to a high degree of perfection, and, if a name were absolutely necessary, he would call her 'St. Cecilia,' a title which she had earned one day at the piano. He had grown formal in manner too, not assuming any rights as an old friend. But now, moved

by a quick impulse, he called her Sissy, and put his arm round her waist, and, as he did so, he felt her heart fluttering, and his own gave a little answering throb.

Sissy was surprised, but grateful too. This tenderness from Godfrey Hammond, who was ordinarily so cold, moved her strangely. Just when she longed for sympathy, to find it where she would never have sought it, was a boon like waters in a thirsty land. Here was one who might continue kind, even if others were estranged. It was pleasant to feel that protecting arm about her, though she found it bewildering too, as she looked down at Hammond's hand, white, and with a great signet ring upon it. Her own lay passively in his firm palm, clasped by his slim, hard fingers. 'Oh, I shall get well!' she whispered softly.

'Sissy,' he said, 'shall I tell you what is the matter with you?' How plainly he could feel that fluttering heart! As he spoke there was a pause, and then a frightened bound, and looking down he saw that even her lips grew white as he spoke. She believed in his keen sagacity; it was the fashion at Brackenhill. 'The child has some foolish little secret,' he thought, but he hastened to say :

'You want change, my dear girl; everybody does sometimes. Shouldn't you like to go away—I don't mean for any of your seaside nonsense—I hate the seaside—shrimps, and bathing machines, and lath-and-plaster crescents—but really away out of your every-day life? Venice—Florence—Rome—what do you say?' She was looking up, with pleasure dawning in her eyes, and Hammond, encouraged, went on: 'Or why not farther still—say to the East at once—eh, Sissy?—Alexandria—Cairo—turbans and veils—camels and deserts—tents—Arabs—minarets—palm-trees—pyramids, and all the rest of it? Like Eöthen, you know.'

She drank in his bald, disjointed talk as if he brought tidings from Paradise. 'Ah, I should like *that*!'

'Well, why not?' said Hammond, observing her closely. 'What have these good people to do, that they need live as if they were rooted here? Shall we get them to take you away, Sissy? No dull English winter, but summer weather till June comes round again.'

All the brightness was gone at once, like April sunshine blotted out by a rain-cloud. Oh, no! I think not. They wouldn't like it,

and perhaps it is best as it is. I don't really believe I want anything, if they would only let me be quiet. But it is very good of you to think about me—Godfrey.' The name came with just a slight hesitation, and there was a little awakening tremor of her hand in his, as if she feared that the protecting clasp might be abruptly withdrawn.

It was not. Hammond only said: 'Ah! you wouldn't care to go abroad just at present?'

She caught at his words. 'No—not just now, with poor Horace away and ill, you know. Some other time, I think, I should like it very much indeed.'

She would not have minded letting Godfrey think that Horace's illness was the cause of her trouble, though she had denied it to Mr. Thorne. Godfrey knew how like brother and sister they had been; what more natural than that she should be sad when her brother was in danger? But Hammond had seen the quick delight, followed by as quick despondency, and was not to be blinded. 'She wants to escape from the people,' he mused, still with his arm about her, 'not from the place. Some foolish innocent little secret, something one could most likely set right in about five minutes, if one only knew it; but she is afraid to speak, and tortures her-

self with all sorts of imaginary terrors. Poor child! if one could but take her away from these worthy folks, and from her troubles too!

His silence alarmed Sissy. 'Don't be vexed with me, if I am stupid, Godfrey—I don't think I can help it.'

'Vexed!' Something in his tone startled both himself and her, and she looked up and met his eyes. For a moment their souls drew very close to each other—for one moment—later they would have laughed at the mere idea, but it was true—their two lives were within a hair's-breadth of melting into one. Her wistful eyes, her trouble, her loneliness, her supreme charm of beautiful youth, would, I verily believe, have drawn a surprising question from Hammond's lips, could he but have been certain of the answer. But if Sissy should laugh at him!

She would not have laughed; I think she would have said 'Yes'—I am sure she would have said 'Yes' if she could have married him then and there, have left all her perplexities behind her, and have travelled with him into the wonderful far-off East of which he talked. Percival had gone away, to Miss Lisle, or to—ah! no matter—and when a girl is conscious of being helpless and alone, the temptation to find a refuge in a marriage

built on something less than love may assail her with almost irresistible force. Esteem, gratitude, implicit trust—will not these suffice? Surely they must. There is nothing to alarm her in the lifelong pledge; the one thing she desires is to feel that her refuge is lasting and secure. She weighs his kindness, not against the joy of perfect marriage, but against the sadness of her lonely life. Yet it will not do—though it may be useless to say so—it will not do if she has learnt the meaning of Love, hardly if she is capable of it.

So it was well for Sissy that Hammond hesitated, fearing to be ridiculous, and then became aware that the tide of passion and sympathy had ebbed as quickly as it flowed, and that the moment which had held such startling possibilities had fled, just as common moments fly. He sighed a little, partly in regret, partly in relief. True, it might be, that he had missed something of Paradise, but, on the other hand, it was very likely that he had escaped making a fool of himself. Balancing the one against the other, there he remained—Godfrey Hammond, forty-four, with a reputation for sagacity, saying with fluent ease, 'Vexed, my dear Sissy! no, why should I be? How can you imagine such a

thing? But I still think a little change would——' And so on, loosening his clasp of her little hand as he spoke.

Mrs. Middleton waylaid him before he left Brackenhill. 'What do you think, Godfrey? Shall I take her to town and consult someone—whom would you recommend? Or what shall I do? Give me your advice.'

'You won't take it if I do,' said Godfrey, rolling up his umbrella with a neatness which was almost miraculous.

'Why not? What is it?'

'Well,' said Godfrey, 'if I were you, I should——leave her alone.'

'Leave her alone? Stand by and see her getting paler and thinner every day!'

'Didn't I tell you? Very well,' said the oracle; 'she wants change—something or somebody. Ask Percival down.'

Now Hammond knew that Percival had lost his dream.

CHAPTER XV.

‘AS OTHERS SEE US.’

A DAY or two later Mrs. Middleton found Sissy looking over photographs—a very harmless occupation, which would have passed unnoticed, but that the girl started, and half closed the album as her aunt came in. She was aware of her foolishness when it was too late, and did her best to mend it. With a careless little laugh she laid the book down open at the portrait which she had been examining. It was the photograph Percival had given her—Bertie Lisle, the handsomest man in her album. Sissy followed the direction of the old lady’s eyes.

‘Isn’t he perfect?’ she said. ‘Shouldn’t you like to see him, Aunt Harriet?’

Aunt Harriet expressed a moderate willingness to look at the young man, if he came in her way.

'I wish he would come in *my* way,' says Sissy, frankly. 'I like to see very beautiful people. I wish he would walk in at that door, now.'

'I don't,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Godfrey hates the very name of Lisle; he can't bear that man's father. It would be very awkward to have to remark to your charming young hero, "I'm afraid you won't think me civil if I don't ask you to dinner, but I'm sure you won't think my brother civil if I do." Unpleasant, wouldn't it be?'

'Dinner!' Sissy tossed her pretty head. 'I wasn't thinking of anything so commonplace as dining with him. I suppose he *does* dine—dear me! I never thought of that before.'

'I should think he did. But what were you going to do with him then? Waltz?'

'No, I don't care so much about waltzing as I used to, I think.' And, after a pause, 'Nobody waltzes like Percival.'

'What then? If you don't want him for dinner-parties or balls——'

'Oh dear, no!' said Sissy. 'Nothing of the sort. No; I was thinking he would do very nicely to run away with.'

'My dear Sissy! What *do* you mean?'

'Something like Jock o' Hazeldean'; and

she sang a snatch of the old song. 'How could one say "No"—how could one be expected to say "No" to him, with a face like that?' And she pointed to the album, where Bertie looked out with a face almost girlishly beautiful, it is true, but with a lively laughing audacity which might qualify him to be the hero of such an exploit as she suggested. 'Who could wonder if one went off with him to the world's end? Suppose William came in with a message, "Mr. Lisle's compliments, m'm, and he's waiting with a chaise-and-four at the little gate, and the horses are rather fresh this morning," wouldn't you catch up your tatting and go?'

'With four frisky horses, and no bonnet on? No, thank you! Mr. Lisle might wait for me till he was grey, or till I went out in a hearse. He might drive me then,' said Mrs. Middleton, cheerfully; 'I shouldn't mind.'

Sissy laughed. 'Well, and I think perhaps I might manage to say "No," if William were the ambassador. On second thoughts, that wouldn't do. No, Mr. Bertie Lisle should come to the window, and look in just as he is looking there, and beckon quietly—you would happen to be facing the other way—and lay his finger on his lips. I should go out as if nothing had happened,

and in half-a-minute you would look out and see me flying down to the little gate, with Bertie Lisle by my side, and the chaise-and-four in the distance. And so—Adieu, Aunt Harriet !'

She sketched the little scene so vividly, and threw such dramatic fervour into the tone of her farewell, that the old lady started, and glanced nervously over her shoulder, as if she expected to see young Lisle on the terrace, with his face pressed against the window. 'Don't talk such dreadful nonsense, child.'

'Nonsense? Is it nonsense? Oh, I think it's just as good sense as a great many things people say and do.' And there was another burst of song :—

She's o'er the border and awa'
Wi' Jock o' Hazeldean.

'O'er the border—that's it exactly,' said Sissy, seriously. 'That's just where I want to be.'

'What, in Scotland? For that's what it would be, I suppose, as you start on the different side,' Aunt Harriet replied, conscientiously working it out. 'Oh, my dear, you wouldn't like that, I'm sure,' with an anxious desire not to leave an invalid's whim

unsatisfied, but to reason it away if it could not be granted. ‘Scotland at this time of the year! Next summer perhaps.’

Sissy stared and laughed. ‘Scotland! Aunt Harriet, who wants to go to Scotland? Pray don’t be so fearfully geographical with your Border; you’ll be telling me something about the population and productions of Berwick-upon-Tweed next!’

‘Why, I thought you meant——’

‘Then I didn’t,’ said Sissy, promptly. ‘Where *is* the Border, I wonder? It seems to me to be all round us, shutting us in like a wall. Didn’t you ever feel it? And what is there on the other side? It can’t be just the same, surely: no, that would be too dreadful. Oh, Jock o’ Hazeldean, where are you? Come quickly, Jock, and take me

O’er the border and awa’.’

‘My dearest Sissy—really——’

‘My dear Aunt Harriet, there’s no harm in wishing to be o’er the Border, is there? And haven’t I heard you say, scores of times, that it’s very disagreeable to travel without a gentleman? There, don’t look so puzzled! I don’t suppose Jock will come while I’m in the mood; but *if* he does—*if* he does——’

And Sissy went off with a laugh and a

swift step which died into silence and a lagging gait as soon as the door had closed behind her.

Surely we must be rather narrow and monotonous beings (I speak modestly for the Human Race), to judge by the anxiety which our friends display if we show the least tendency to deviate from our ordinary groove. 'Ah! I thought So-and-So didn't seem quite like himself,' or 'herself,' as the case might be; and every one looks mysterious or shocked. I dare say they are right. We are bound so closely to this rather wearisome self, that it is advisable to make the best of it. We cannot get rid of the Something which is partly what we are now, and partly what other people imagine us, and partly what circumstances force us to be, and partly what we once were, and never by any possibility can be again. Sometimes when we are alone with that Something, gazing thoughtfully at it, a gleam of light will fall on it as it turns in its sleep and show a face that is altogether strange. It is cumbered with dead loves, dead friendships, dead hopes, dead faiths. What is it? 'Yourself,' they say. Ah, no! It is not myself; but I feel that I am bound to it, and it is useless to drag it into follies in a vain attempt to get

free. Better to come back, and walk in the appointed way; and since we must live together, and its power is great to help or harm, let it be as fair and pure as I can make it.

Mrs. Middleton was greatly troubled and perplexed by Sissy's uneasy bursts of merriment. 'She isn't like herself,' the old lady thought. 'What could she mean by talking in that random way about Jock o' Hazeldean?' It might have passed for mere nonsense, but for the certainty that Sissy had been secretly studying Bertie's photograph. 'She never can have seen him anywhere and—and fallen in love with him!' thought the simple-minded old lady. 'Oh, no, impossible!' It did not occur to her that *Percival* had brought the photograph to Brackenhill. Nor would she have understood the interest which Sissy might take in seeking beneath the features of Bertie Lisle for the unknown features of the girl she believed to be her rival; for I doubt if she remembered that there was a Miss Lisle at all.

'Dear me, it's very puzzling,' she said to herself, as she clasped the album and laid it down. 'I wish Godfrey Hammond were here, or even Percival. I can't make Sissy out. I wish she would see Dr. Grey; or if

she would only try the cod-liver-oil, it would be something.'

Consequently, it was a real pleasure to Aunt Middleton when she saw a neat portmanteau in the hall and heard that Mr. Percival had met Mr. Thorne just inside the gate, and was walking up. A minute earlier Sissy had stood on the same spot, gazing at the neatly engraved name, 'PERCIVAL THORNE,' as if it had a snake-like fascination for her. In a quarter of an hour, she thought, Percival would be there—would stand before her with his dark eyes shining, and his hand outstretched, stately and handsome, like a king as he was—her king, living and dying. Only a few minutes and she would hear his voice, musical and full, whose tones always conveyed ideas of leisure and abundant kindliness. And her heart within her was heavy as lead.

'Now it will all come out,' she said to herself, as she turned away; 'and what will Percival do? Surely he would stand by her. If he would, all else might go to utter wreck, and she be unconscious of loss. But if not——'

She stood by a window on the stairs, and looked out across the park. Everything was grey and still. The year had lost its

splendour, as of royal robes, and wore the aspect of a dethroned king waiting in apathetic silence till the end should come. There is something very mournful about autumn when its time is nearly spent. It lies stretched in faint gleams of sunshine, as if it dreamed of glory that is gone, clasping some poor remnants of the beauty and verdure of the summer. But it is so despairing that it will make no effort to retain even these. At the first breath of winter it lets its handful of yellow leaves escape, and gives up life with its last flowers. Sissy felt something of this as she looked out, and saw two figures coming along the sodden drive. They talked as they came, with unusual earnestness she thought, pausing more than once, while the taller bent his head, as if in eager attention. Surely Fate would not be so cruel as to betray her before Percival crossed the threshold, and rob her of the touch of his hand, his smile and word of greeting?

She would have known that she was in no danger from their talk could she have overheard it. Mr. Thorne was eloquent about the iniquities of one of his tenants, and his grandson was feigning an interest he did not feel. As they drew near the long grey

house, young Thorne looked up and thought, 'Sissy will be somewhere about'; and while he said, 'I don't see how you could have acted otherwise, half-measures don't do with a fellow of that stamp,' his eyes wandered over the windows, which glittered feebly in a passing gleam of sunlight. The door opened as they went up the steps, and Aunt Middleton came out to greet them. Percival was hurried into the hall, questioned and made much of; but he looked round for another greeting, and was suddenly aware that he had been looking forward to it ever since he had thought of coming down to Brackenhill, perhaps even earlier. For the first time in his life he hesitated to ask for Sissy, but after a moment Mr. Thorne looked round.

'Why, where's our little girl? Sissy! here's Percival, Sissy!'

She had but to turn the corner of the stairs, and she stood like a fair vision above them. She did not speak, but her eyes met Percival's, and a sudden rose-colour flushed her face. Some people have features which blur and distort the meaning of their souls. Hesitation looks like sullenness, shyness like awkward pride, gratitude like coldness, nay very Love himself wears so clumsy a guise

that he is apt to be scared at his own aspect. But, if Sissy's lips and eyes failed exactly to convey her thought, it was because they lent it an added loveliness. As she came down, step by step, she was anxious and perplexed, and these doubtful feelings had for expression a shy and lingering grace in which the painter might have found a picture, the poet a poem. Percival, though neither, found both. Even Mrs. Middleton was struck. 'Why, Sissy,' she said, 'you look like a queen!'

Percival smiled, and, while she was yet a couple of steps above him, he knelt on one knee on the lowest stair, and kissed the little hand which she held out. Tears swam in Sissy's eyes, and there was a lump in her throat. She dared not attempt to speak, but with the other hand she timidly touched his waves of strong, short hair.

'Ah! we shall be all right now,' said Mr. Thorne to himself, with a silent chuckle; 'I needn't have feared that anyone was fretting for Horace.'

The pretty picture lasted but for a moment, and all tongues were loosened as they went into the drawing-room. Sissy sat on the hearthrug, leaning against Aunt Harriet. Whenever she spoke Percival's eyes sought

her's with swift attention, and once while Mrs. Middleton was wandering round an anecdote, he stooped and silently gave her a screen, and both were conscious that their hands touched. Sissy laughed and talked the quicker for that touch. There was a feverish brightness in her looks and words; it was like the vivid flitting of a butterfly, if a butterfly could be conscious of the frailty of its life and loveliness, and make little distracted dashes here and there, looking airily brilliant all the while.

'Time to go and dress,' said Mrs. Middleton at last, and Sissy sprang up and went hastily away. Mr. Thorne looked at his watch. 'Ah! I must speak to Duncan.' (Duncan was the butler.) 'I think he and I know your taste—don't we, Percival?' and he looked proudly at the grandson who *had* a taste which was worth considering.

'I'll trust you, sir,' said the young man, with a smile, 'as far as it is possible to trust anyone in such a matter.'

He turned to Mrs. Middleton as soon as they were alone.

'So your last news of Horace was better.'

'Rather,' she replied; 'but I am afraid to build much on one hopeful letter. Still I am very thankful.'

'You said Sissy was ill.'

'So she is, though she is wonderfully bright this afternoon. Don't you think she looks ill?'

'H'm—she looks like a perfectly beautiful and delicate flower, as if a touch might destroy her. Yes; perhaps she does look ill, but it is the most bewitching, the most extraordinarily charming illness that ever was. If it were only catching, I think she would be mobbed.'

'I'm afraid in a day or two you won't have any doubt about her,' said Mrs. Middleton.

'Ah?' Percival gazed thoughtfully at the fire. Suddenly he lifted his eyes to the old lady's face. 'My grandfather doesn't prescribe for her, does he?'

She was horrified at the question. 'Good gracious, no! You *don't* suppose I should let him go near her with his nasty poisons?'

'No, I didn't really suppose it. It was only an idea which occurred to me. Sissy looks a little like the stories one reads, of people who are under the influence of some powerful drug.'

Mr. Thorne was curious in the matter of poisons, and kept a rather dangerous little medicine chest under lock and key in his own

room. If he were ill, which he seldom was, he liked a remedy which had to be accurately measured by drops, and of which an overdose would be fatal. Better still, he liked handling little carefully stoppered phials, containing so much death. Horace thought it an idiotic whim for anyone to have, Mrs. Middleton shuddered at it, Percival understood it and smiled. 'Gives him a sense of power,' which was precisely the fact.

'She shan't be under the influence of any of his drugs,' said Aunt Harriet. 'I spoke to Dr. Grey about her, and he said, "try cod-liver-oil."'

'More harmless, no doubt,' smiled Percival; 'but much more unpleasant.'

'She won't take it,' said Mrs. Middleton, plaintively; 'and when I told Godfrey Hammond, he said Dr. Grey was an idiot.'

'Ah? I'm rather of his opinion. What did *he* recommend for Sissy? I know you swear by him, and he always has something to suggest. What did Hammond tell you to do?'

Aunt Harriet had the words of Mr. Hammond's prescription in her ears, 'Ask Percival down'; but she could not very well repeat them, with Percival's dark glances fixed upon her face. The guileless old lady

was confused. A faint colour mounted to her wintry cheek, and there was a little sound of nervous laughter in her voice.

'Oh, I don't know. He didn't say very much. I think he fancied she would be better if she had a little change and society, perhaps. You see Sissy is young, and—and—we are not much company for her, Godfrey and I, you know.' She was floundering painfully and knew it. 'Is that a needle on the carpet, just by your foot?'

Percival sought for it anxiously, but in vain. 'I can't see it either, now,' said Mrs. Middleton; 'the light must have shone on it just where I was standing,' and the deceitful old lady went back to the precise spot on the hearthrug, where she had been before. 'I was just opposite that vase, I know,' and eyed the carpet intently with her head a little on one side. 'How very funny! I can't see it now. Don't bother yourself any more, Percival; I really think it can't have been a needle, after all.'

'Do you think not?' said Percival, with a slight quiver at the corner of his mouth. 'Hadn't we better make sure? They are nasty things to lie about. I remember my nurse used to say so. Suppose I ring for the candles, and we have a hunt.'

'Oh, no ; I don't think we need. I'm nearly sure it wasn't a needle. Never mind it.'

'Are you quite sure ?' he persisted ; 'I'm afraid you are saying it to spare me. Suppose it sticks into your old tabby cat ! Let's see if we can't find out the mystery about this needle, Aunt Harriet ; my eyes are tolerably sharp.'

'A great deal too sharp,' she answered quickly ; 'leave the needle alone.'

Percival got up, looked her deliberately in the face, and they both laughed.

'I don't think *you* are looking quite the same as usual,' she said, carrying the war into the enemy's country.

'What is the difference ?'

'I noticed it while we all sat talking here. You don't look quite so—so contented as you always used.'

'I've nothing to make me discontented,' he answered, in a tone which for him was a little hasty. 'I am just the same as ever, rather more contented if anything, at least with rather more cause to be so.'

'That may be,' she answered ; 'especially as "contented" wasn't exactly the word I meant.'

'What then ?'

'Well, lazy; you don't look quite so indolent as you did.'

'Don't I?' said Percival, who of late had been conscious of faint stirrings of a novel restlessness; 'I didn't know I had given proofs of vehement energy since my arrival this afternoon.'

'No; I don't think you have. Go this minute and get ready for dinner,' said Mrs. Middleton.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRINCIPLES AND PERSONS.

DINNER was over, the wine and fruit were on the table. Sissy was peeling one of those late pears, which, though they may be tolerably good when nothing better is to be obtained, are an insult to the melting juicy fruit which we ate in the golden summer. Solid durable qualities are all very well in their way; let us be thankful for them, and lay up our winter stores of pears and apples. But, oh! the banquets of July and August; a moment's enjoyment and then a memory!

Percival sipped his wine with a grave satisfaction which his grandfather was delighted to see. Mrs. Middleton was right; there was a change in our hero. He had awakened to a more practical appreciation of the world and what it held. Having discovered that it was limited, and that his power was limited too, nothing remained but to ascertain what joys were within his reach,

to make the most of those, and to close his eyes to impossible visions faint and far away. Percival had begun to think about storing winter fruit. He had substituted a lower aim for an indefinite desire, but in outward appearance he was even more like a girl's hero of romance than he had been. A little more decision and defiance in his glance, a slight shadow under his eyes making them more sombre than before, a little more readiness of look and speech—there was no great change.

He broke the silence with a very commonplace remark : 'So you have a new—is he a young footman or an aged page ?'

'Oh ! you mean George,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'He *is* rather young, but I hope he'll do.'

'I don't think he will,' said Percival.

'Why not ? He is a good, steady lad, and his mother is a widow and very badly off. I really think I've seen clumsier boys,' said the kind old lady, making a strenuous effort to compliment George, and to do it as little at the expense of truth as possible ; 'and he's at an awkward age too.'

'Undoubtedly. I dare say he is a good, honest fellow—in fact, he looks like it ; but if ever you make a servant of him——'

'I think he does his best,' said Sissy.

'I fear he does; there might be some hope of him if he were doing his worst. I wonder whether you would speak up for him, Sissy, if you knew how very narrowly you escaped a deluge of bread sauce. I assure you for a moment I was in a perfect agony of apprehension——'

'How very good of you!'

'Lest there should be none left for me! And after that I noticed him a little more. He halts between two opinions, and before doing the slightest thing he tries to work it out in all its possible consequences. Meanwhile, he doesn't wait and we do.'

'He is dreadfully afraid of Duncan,' said Mrs. Middleton.

'So I perceived. And to crown all,' said Percival, 'he is one of those unfortunate people who cannot meditate freely unless their mouths are hanging open. I don't think you'll break him of that, and if you tied it up, it might suggest mumps.'

'He is awkward,' Mrs. Middleton allowed; 'but, you see, his mother is such a hard-working woman.'

'That is a great merit in George, no doubt. But couldn't you make something else of him?'

Mr. Thorne, who had apparently been lost in thought, woke up : ' Would you like to send him to Parliament to support Mr. Gladstone ? There's a vacancy at Fordborough just now.'

' A vacancy at Fordborough—how so ?'

' Old Bridgman died last night of apoplexy ; it was telegraphed down this afternoon. Silas Fielding told me.'

Percival leant back in his chair, and thoughtfully caressed the down on his upper lip. His grandfather watched him out of the corners of his eyes.

' That was sudden. He wasn't an old man at all, was he ?' said Mrs. Middleton.

' Only sixty-two ; but he always looked like the sort of man who might go off in a fit any day.'

' It will be a blow to the Fordborough Liberals,' said Percival. ' Bridgman's property in the neighbourhood gave him great weight with the half-and-half people. Has he a son ?'

' By his second marriage, yes. A boy of ten or twelve.'

' Oh ! then they must look out for a new man altogether.'

' I don't see that they need look very far,' said Mr. Thorne.

Percival smiled. 'No, I dare say not. Constituencies are like heiresses, apt to be even a little overdone with perfectly disinterested lovers.'

The old Squire filled his glass to the brim: 'What do you think of Mr. Percival Thorne for a candidate?—shall I drink to his success?'

Sensation, as the reporters say, for there was no doubt that Godfrey Thorne was in earnest.

'You wish *me* to stand?' said Percival, after a pause.

'Why not?'

'On the Radical side?'

'No; I don't wish that. But the crude, haphazard ideas you call your principles, would, I fear, prevent you from standing on any other at present. Besides, there is no opening for a Conservative.'

'H'm!' said Percival; 'and I suppose I may count on the Brackenhill influence to back me?'

'Undoubtedly you may.'

Mrs. Middleton became exceedingly pink; even Percival was startled. He said nothing, but he propped his chin on his hand and gazed thoughtfully at the old man with a whimsical expression of perplexity and expectation.

‘What now?’ said Mr. Thorne; ‘do you think I’m going to change into some curious kind of wild animal, that you all sit looking at me in this fashion?’

‘Say an ostrich,’ Percival blandly suggested; ‘capable of swallowing things one would have imagined must disagree with him. No! I don’t *expect* that. I am looking for some further development.’

Mr. Thorne enjoyed the situation. ‘You have only to make up your mind,’ he said; ‘if you choose to attempt it, I will find the necessary funds and help you with all the influence I have.’

‘WHAT?’ said Mrs. Middleton. She was crimson.

Her brother looked coolly at her: ‘Why not?’

‘You call yourself a Conservative?’

‘Never!’ said Godfrey, with emphasis. ‘It’s a nasty slippery word. You think you have got hold of a man underneath it, and he wriggles away—Heaven only knows where! Call yourself a Tory, and I know what you mean. People are Liberal-Conservatives or Conservative-Liberals now-a-days, and no one sees any absurdity in it; but what should you think of a fellow who called himself a Liberal-Tory?’

Mrs. Middleton returned to the charge.
'Then you consider yourself a Tory?'

He bowed a smiling little assent, and sipped his wine.

'And yet you tell Percival—when you know he is a Radical, a Red Republican——' The young man arched his brows, and with a swift movement of his hands deprecated the extreme tint; but Mrs. Middleton swept on, heedless of the silent protest: 'You tell Percival that he may count on your support. Is that conscientious?'

'Did I say I was conscientious?'

'Perhaps it was as well you did not,' his sister retorted. The Thornes have been Tories for—how many generations, Godfrey? I never expected to hear my brother call himself by the old name and be false to the cause. And let me tell you, Godfrey, I call that——'

'My dear,' said the old man, with the sweetest courtesy, 'in your present state of mind I wouldn't *call* it anything, if I were you. But don't let me prevent your thinking it what you please.'

'That I most certainly shall,' said Aunt Harriet, still much flushed and very warlike of aspect.

'Well,' Mr. Thorne conceded, 'perhaps

it does sound peculiar. But, if you only think a moment, we are all being carried steadily and irresistibly towards democracy.'

'So much the worse!' snapped Aunt Harriet.

'Granted—so much the worse! but I can't alter it. By my great-grandson's time there'll be nothing left for a Tory to fight for.'

She groaned.

'And if my grandson likes to help in pulling down what little there is now, he may. It won't make much difference to the next generation, and I don't care about the next generation. My vote and my interest won't stop the tide. In a few years what influence I have will probably be swamped. It used to be a power, and now it is mere ornament—hollow—a toy weapon, which will break if I draw it against the enemy. Let Percival have it to play with if he likes——'

'Sissy, is my cap straight?' said Mrs. Middleton in a hurried aside. She was so much discomposed that she felt as if it must be awry, and was but half reassured when Sissy smiled and nodded.

Percival as he sat opposite,

Played with spoons, explored his plate's design,
And ranged the olive-stones about its edge,

while he revolved the new idea in his mind. Mr. Thorne turned to him :

'Well, what do you say? There's strength enough in Toryism yet to give you a little healthful exercise, I dare say.'

'More than that,' said Percival.

'You are a clever fellow, no doubt,' his grandfather went on, 'but you won't have made a clean sweep of everything before I die. After that'—he shrugged his shoulders—'you must do as you please. Some day, perhaps, you will have finished your job, and can sit down and rest in your ideal world with its whole surface stamped to a dead level of mud. By that time I trust that I shall have long been admitted to the delightfully Tory society I shall find above.'

'How do you know they'll be Conservative up there, sir?'

'Of course they will!' said Mr. Thorne; 'it must be evident to any mind not warped by Radical prejudice. The Tories are nearly all dead, and most of them were a great deal better than anybody else. And if a few Radicals should find their way in, they'll turn Conservative as soon as they have distanced their fellows.'

Mrs. Middleton returned to the charge in a gentler tone. 'I dare say what you say

may be very true, Godfrey. I do think things are coming to a dreadful pass, what with the uppishness of servants, and the Trades' Unions, and the hats and feathers the girls will wear about here. Very likely you are right——'

'My grandfather is exaggerating to an alarming extent,' said Percival.

'Exaggerating!' said the old man. 'Not a bit of it.'

'You despair of your cause too soon, sir.'

'Too soon! Am I to put off despairing for fifty years or so? What is the good of shutting my eyes to what will assuredly come? To know that one must despair some day is to despair at once.'

'I dare say what you say may be very true, Godfrey,' Aunt Harriet began again; 'but I don't see that that makes it a bit more right for you to go and help the Radicals when you call yourself a Tory. You will always have to think that it was partly your work if they win——'

'I should say,' Mr. Thorne interrupted her, with the air of a man who is weighing something very accurately indeed, 'that I should have exactly as much to answer for as if I lent the river a helping hand to leap

down at Niagara. My conscience—possibly hardened—is equal to that burden, Harriet.'

'Then it oughtn't to be. If we are coming to such a horrid state of things——'

'My dear, my dear,' in a soothing tone, 'you'll be out of it—with me. It's only these poor young people here——'

'You ought to stand by the right to the last. I'm not blaming Percival. I can't think why he has such nasty opinions; but, as he has them, it can't be helped.' She glanced at the young fellow's face with wonder and a faint shadow of disgust, as if she saw Republicanism coming visibly out, very red indeed, like an unpleasant sort of rash. 'There's nothing more to be said about it, and I hope he knows that I should like him to get on, and that I wish him well in everything else. But you don't think as he does, thank goodness! and after all, Godfrey, your vote wasn't given you for Percival.'

'Well done!' said the young man. 'Why, Aunt Harriet, you'll make a Woman's Rights champion of me! Astounding fact! Here is a woman who prefers principles to persons in politics! Aunt Harriet, do you know you are very interesting indeed?'

'I know that you are very impertinent,'

said the old lady, with a smile. She was anxious that he should understand that her opposition arose from no ill-will to him, and wanted to atone for any unkindness in her words.

Percival made a small note in his pocket-book. 'When hereafter I balance the arguments for and against the extension of the franchise to women, you will score one for it,' he said with much solemnity. 'You will possibly influence my political career, and should I enter Parliament and supersede Mr. Gladstone, you may seriously affect the course of legislation.'

'Very good,' said the old lady. 'Give me a vote, and I'll use it against you. Trust me.'

'I do,' was the fervent reply.

'And what does Sissy say to it all?' asked Mr. Thorne. 'Will you vote for Percival, Sissy, and send him to Parliament to undermine Church and State, and trample down everything? He will be Citizen Thorne, and George the footman will be Citizen something else, and you'll all be free and equal—eh, Sissy?'

She flashed a swift shy glance at Percival. 'I'll tell you what I'll do with my vote,' she said, 'when I get it.'

She was not much alarmed. She thought Mr. Thorne's little sketch of the future sounded very disagreeable; but if Percival wanted people to be citizens, no doubt it was all right. A girl who is in love, and still in her teens, cannot be greatly disturbed by any schemes of universal equality. You may say what you please, and so may she, but in her heart she is perfectly convinced that it is beyond the power of mortals to reduce her hero to the ordinary level of mankind.

Aunt Harriet had rather distinguished herself that evening, and had made more impression on her brother than she at all supposed. Now she proceeded to add her final argument, as a child adds one more brick to a frail wooden tower, and of course she brought the whole structure down with a crash.

'And there's something else to be thought of, Godfrey. What will all your neighbours think? I couldn't bear to hear them say you had turned traitor, when the Thornes have never failed them yet. Why, what did our grandfather spend on that great election when he vowed he would have the seat, if it cost him Brackenhill? Oh, Godfrey, what would Mr. Falconer say, or Mr. Garnett?

‘That’s to be thought of, is it?’ said Mr. Thorne. ‘No doubt you are right. Messrs. Garnett and Falconer and the rest of them consider me ticketed and shelved, and look upon my vote as theirs. Well, I think it is about time that they should learn that it is mine.’

‘Oh, Godfrey! you know I didn’t mean it so!’ said Mrs. Middleton.

He smiled. ‘There’s nothing more to be said. I have pledged my word, and the decision rests with Percival.’

Aunt Harriet perceived her fatal mistake, and had tact enough not to make it worse by further words. The moment she found herself in the drawing-room with Sissy, she hurried to one of the old-fashioned mirrors. ‘My dear Sissy, are you sure my cap *is* straight? I don’t think it *can* be, I feel so dreadfully awry!’

CHAPTER XVII.

A MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTER.

'PERCIVAL,' said Sissy, as later in the evening he joined her at the piano, 'have you made up your mind yet?'

'Not at present. I feel a curious reluctance to say 'No', and yet——'

'What?'

He hesitated. 'Well, I am not sure that my political creed is definite enough for action. And I see other difficulties in the way. It is Horace, and not I, who should stand for Fordborough.'

'Always Horace first.'

'Well, he will live at Brackenhill—at least, I hope so. Probably in a few years' time I shall have no connection whatever with the neighbourhood.'

'Don't talk like that—it sounds very horrid,' said Sissy. 'Horace knows nothing of politics.'

‘Not much,’ Percival smiled. ‘Less than I do; though I can’t think how he contrives it. But what then? He is a Conservative, and, unlike my grandfather, a Conservative of a fighting type.’

‘Why, aren’t you a Conservative, too?’ said Sissy. ‘They were talking nonsense, weren’t they? You don’t want to be Citizen Thorne, do you? Not really?’

Percival disclaimed any aspirations of the kind. ‘I’m not much of a Radical,’ he said. — ‘I think I’m too idle.’

‘I can’t make up my mind whether I want you to stand or not,’ said Sissy thoughtfully. ‘M.P. certainly sounds very nice, but I should have to wear a yellow dress, and read the debates, to see when you said anything; and yellow isn’t my colour, I’m afraid——’

‘And the debates aren’t your style of reading, I know. But Sissy, you are a Tory; you mustn’t wear my colours.’

‘Oh, yes, I should. I should be a Radical just for once, by way of a change. Uncle Thorne would want someone to keep him in countenance.’

‘How noble of you! I imagine the pair of you gallantly confronting the sorrowful and disgusted county. What a help you will be to him!’

'Percival, don't laugh at me. Do you hear, sir?'

'Laugh — why, I am perfectly serious. Of course, you will be a help. On a hot day, when people fly in the face of nature, and insist on the energetic pursuit of a purpose, I can't tell you what a support the butterflies are to me!'

'And I am a butterfly?' said Sissy. She was playing little tinkling notes with her right hand, as her manner was, when anyone talked to her at the piano.

'Please,' said the tall young man at her side. 'Everything and everybody will soon be too self-conscious and analytical for any heedless happiness to be left in the world at all. We are so prudent and anxious, we can't so much as revel in fruit, or drink new milk, without a reminder that we ought to be careful, to preserve the one and condense the other, and put them into air-tight tins, so that we may have a spoonful or so all the year round, instead of a reckless happy feast to-day. Soon everything will be in tins—good, common-place, and economical. Be a butterfly, Sissy. Don't be like hard-working dingy little ants and things making nasty little holes and houses all through June, because their lives are nothing but a

foreboding of November. Be a butterfly, Sissy.'

'Yes,' said Sissy, simply. 'But it would be dreadful to be always expecting to skim about and be gay, if one happened to be tired, or hurt.'

'And if one attempted to help the poor thing, one would brush all the bloom off its wings,' said Percival. 'But, Sissy, this train of thought isn't right for a butterfly, at least not yet. I have an idea that the Butterfly of the Future will count martyrdom in the cause of knowledge an enviable fate, and will fly to the collectors to secure the immortality of having a pin stuck through it, and being classified in a camphor-scented drawer.' He looked at his watch. 'Why, go to bed, Sissy; it is eleven o'clock, and you look pale. Dream of a yellow dress.'

'A brimstone butterfly — what would Aunt Harriet say?' And Sissy went off.

Percival rested his elbow on the piano. With his dark brows and compressed lips he appeared lost in thought, but in reality the letters M.P. floated before his eyes, and he wavered idly between Shall I? and Shall I not? His grandfather paced to and fro in the dim end of the room, and Aunt Harriet was busy over an account book. If anything

vexed or worried her she generally flew to her accounts. I imagine she felt that a long column of her undecided figures fully justified any amount of irritation, in which it might otherwise be sinful to indulge. She glanced at Percival now and then, and once she fell into deep meditation, drawing hieroglyphics on her blotting paper till the fine point of her pen acquired a hairy knob, which disconcerted her very much when she recommenced work. Her impatient exclamation roused her brother from his reverie.

'Bedtime,' he said, and bade her good night as he passed. 'Are you considering what you will say to the Fordborough voters, Percival?'

'I haven't decided whether I will face them yet.'

'Try it — try it,' said the old man. 'I'm not far from eighty, you know. If you don't make a beginning of your career soon, I shan't live to see it.'

'My career!' said Percival, with a hopeless scorn, which might have suited the elder man of the two.

'We must see about your address,' the other went on, 'and the sooner the better.'

'I can't write it to-night, if you, mean

that!' said Percival. 'I'm apt to feel much too happy and well satisfied for that kind of thing in the evening. I might compose it in bits, during odd moments of waiting for dinner, perhaps.'

'I wish Hammond were here,' mused Mr. Thorne, 'he might help us to get it into shape. I don't understand these Fordborough electors myself.' His glance as he spoke might have fully explained the meaning of the word *canaille* to anyone who was ignorant of it. 'They want something rather strongly seasoned, I suppose.'

'Do you think Hammond understands them better?'

'Yes. He is one generation nearer these new ideas, even if he hates them, and he is very practical. I think I must take in the *Telegraph*. Isn't that the sort of paper to give one ideas?'

'*My* ideas, no doubt, you mean,' said Percival, loftily.

'Not at all, but the ideas of your probable supporters. Possibly you imagine they would be identical?' said the old man, with a glance half scornful, half envying, with which generous illusions are often greeted.

'H'm. Perhaps I did. Well, to-morrow will be time enough to decide. I'll think it over to-night.'

'Do so. But remember that there is no time to lose. And if you do not make the attempt now, some else one may come in, who will not easily be got rid of.'

'Oh, I understand that it is now or never,' said Percival; 'I am going to take that for granted.'

Mr. Thorne was moving off, but he paused. 'Now or never—no, I don't say that. You may have another opportunity; still, don't throw this one away;' and he went.

'I suppose he means if—if anything happens to poor Horace,' thought Percival. 'But I'm not going to count on *that*.'

('If anything happens,' we say. As if death were a strange and doubtful chance.)

Aunt Harriet wiped her pen, and looked anxiously at the musing figure seated by Sissy's piano. There was such silence for the next few minutes that the clock on the chimney-piece seemed to tick louder on purpose to break it. Aunt Harriet's thoughts, and Percival's too, set themselves to its monotonous accompaniment. 'Shall I?—shall I not?—Shall I?—shall I not?' At last she resolved, 'I will.'

‘Sit down,’ she said, when Percival rose to bid her good-night, as she crossed the room towards him; ‘I want to speak to you.’

‘Say on.’

‘But sit down. Why are you so ridiculously tall?’

Percival sat down, and the little old lady, in her grey satin gown and point lace, stood over him.

‘See here,’ she said, ‘you must do what you please about this election (I’m sure I wish old Bridgman hadn’t died, but he has been aggravating me in every possible way all his life, so this is only a proper ending to it), but you shan’t make up your mind without considering what it will cost Godfrey.’

‘Elections are cheaper than they used to be,’ said Percival drily.

‘They need be, seeing the sort we elect,’ the old lady retorted. ‘But I wasn’t thinking only of the money. How do you suppose he will feel when all the county families turn their backs on him?’

‘Ten years younger and a great deal happier. Why, Aunt Harriet, don’t you know that to oppose everyone, and startle everyone, is absolute life to my grandfather!’

'Very pleasant for Sissy and myself—that. And for Horace too. Take your own way, Percival, but remember what all his old friends will say.'

'Let them say.'

'They will declare that you are taking advantage of an old man's childishness to use him for your own advancement.'

'My grandfather childish!'

'They are sure to say it. They say now that you turn him round your finger. And indeed, Percival, I question very much if he would have done this twenty years ago. But you must decide. I only ask you to consider him a little.'

'Well, Aunt Harriet,' said Percival, 'I make no promise, but I will tell you this. It is not likely that I shall accept his offer. Every reason I can think of is against it. There is nothing on the other side, except a fancy, a reluctance to say "No," for which I can't at all account.'

Mrs. Middleton eyed him with her head on one side. 'I almost think I would rather it were the other way. Well, good-night, Percival.'

As soon as she was gone, he drew an armchair to the centre of the hearthrug, threw a couple of logs on the fire, and

settled himself for a comfortable meditation. The old butler, who had been yawning outside, looked despairingly in, feigned astonishment at the sight of him, and was about to retreat.

‘Go to bed, Duncan,’ said Percival. ‘Don’t let anyone sit up for me. I am going to be—busy, for a little while. I’ll see that all is safe. Good-night.’ And he sank luxuriously back, and stretched himself before the leaping blaze, as the old man went out.

He was perplexed. Being just at that time so conscious of the limitations of his life, he was strongly drawn to this opening with its novel possibilities. It was unforeseen, and that was in itself a charm. If he refused, what would be left to him? On the other hand, if he accepted, he would be injuring his grandfather and Horace. And for what? For his own amusement, for he could hardly say that it was for the sake of political views, which he had never been able to define.

He was a sort of Radical from conviction, but his feelings and tastes were Conservative. One day, when he was nothing at all, it had occurred to him, *à propos* of something or other, that the circumstances into which a

man was born could hardly be reckoned as a merit of his own. It was not a very startling discovery. Few of us would be inclined to deny the assertion, I suppose, but it does not particularly affect most people. It seemed, however, to take possession of Percival, and, meditating on it, he was led into strange paths which he would not have chosen, but whence he saw no possible escape. He was not altogether pleased with his political creed, feeling a little as if it had him in a string, and were leading him about.

Horace—his grandfather—they were to be considered, but that was not all. Percival felt that he ought to take a lofty and general view of the question. He attempted it, but he hardly seemed to grasp it somehow, and it still remained misty. Possibly, he thought, he had not placed himself at a sufficient distance from it to judge impartially. He laid his head comfortably back, gazed at the ceiling, with its shadows and ruddy lights, ever varying, yet the same, and endeavoured to abstract his mind from the everyday surroundings of his life, in order to concentrate his power of thought on the simple question—'Have I a working political creed?' During a few moments of intense thought—it might be a little hazy, but he was dimly

conscious that it was most sublime—he went rather further in the process of self-abstraction than he originally intended. Gliding past such formalities as an election, probably contested, and the declaration of the poll, he found himself Member for Fordborough. Nor was this all. He had gained the ear of the House, he had got rid of all his perplexities, he was making a great speech. The words poured from his lips amid breathless attention. The strangest fact was, that the fluent speaker had not the least idea of the subject of his eloquence, or even of the end of the sentence which he had begun. Good heavens! he did not so much as know the next syllable! Where did it all come from? And if it stopped suddenly? . . . It *did* stop suddenly. He groped wildly for a word, turning very cold,—and found himself sitting bolt upright, staring into the dark.

It was not utterly dark, for he soon perceived a dull red spot before him, the glimmering embers of that joyous blaze. He found an old letter in his pocket, twisted up the cover, and thrust it into the wood ashes. At first it smouldered doubtfully, he stooped down and blew it gently, and it burst into a flame. The light played for a moment on the shining

watch and the intent face above it, and then went out. But he had learned all he wanted to know: it was five-and-twenty minutes to three. The little sparks ran hurriedly to and fro in the rustling black paper, and died as they ran. The last went out, and Percival stood up in the darkness and stretched himself.

Five-and-twenty minutes to three. Not a very dreadful fact in itself, but terrible in a house like Brackenhill, where everyone was asleep by midnight, and to be up late was supposed to partake of the nature of sin. Such houses seem to take their character from their occupants. The doors creak in horror when you open them cautiously, the boards on which you set your feet are in league to betray you, the dismay with which you start from one arousing the next, while every echo is miraculously awake. Percival groped his way to the hall table, where he knew that a candle and matches would be ready for him. He found the box without any trouble, but the match he tried, after scratching noisily and uselessly over the sand paper more than once, exploded suddenly with a report like a pistol (at least so he afterwards affirmed), and then went out before he could find his candlestick. A second attempt suc-

ceeded better, though it was followed by the discovery that they had supplied him with a candle whose illuminating power was at least equal to that of magnesium wire. It seemed impossible that it should not flood every nook and cranny with a dazzling glare, and awake the entire household. Shading the terrible luminary as well as he could with his hand, the young man started on his perilous journey up the shallow steps of darkly polished oak, and as he went he weighed the chances of detection.

He would not have far to go when he reached the head of the stairs. A few steps to the right would take him to the passage, at the entrance to which was his room. Sissy's was a couple of doors farther down. 'I hope I shan't frighten the poor child,' thought Percival, 'but the way in which this staircase creaks is really an interesting phenomenon, if she could only appreciate it.' Aunt Harriet's room was a little farther still on the opposite side. The old lady slept very soundly indeed, and had little fear of robbers, the idea of fire absorbing all her stock of terror. 'I shall do very well as far as she is concerned,' thought Percival, 'unless she happens to take this confounded creaking for the crackling of flames! Good heavens! what is that?'

He paused on the landing, and the slight but distinct rustling which had startled him paused too. It was in the passage which he was about to enter.

His pulses quickened as he stood, listening intently and screening the light. He was no coward, but he felt himself in an awkward position. Some one was just round the corner, but who was it? Mr. Thorne and his man Turner slept quite at the other end of the house, and the servants' rooms were all on the next floor. He did not think that either Sissy or Aunt Middleton would be likely to play hide-and-seek in this alarming fashion in the middle of the night. It might be a burglar, making ready to spring upon him, and it cannot be denied that it is unpleasant to stand in watchful suspense, which may at any moment end in a life-and-death struggle with an armed antagonist. Percival felt all at once that he was breathing hard, as he stared at the spot where his foe might suddenly appear. Then a cold shudder ran through him from head to heel.

'Where does Hannah Davis sleep, I wonder?'

Hannah was Mrs. Middleton's maid, faithful but hysterical. If by any chance it were she, Percival's appearance would be

greeted with a series of wild screams. 'I'd rather it were a burglar,' he thought; 'any one but Hannah!'

It was really not a minute from his first alarm when a face peered round the corner. Sissy stood there, wrapped in a white dressing-gown. Pale as death and with dilated eyes, she held up her hand in sign of silence. A step, and Percival was at her side. 'Sissy, in heaven's name what is amiss?'

She clung with trembling hands to his arm before she answered. 'There's a man, a robber—oh, Percival!'

Percival looked hastily round, as if he expected to be introduced to the man then and there. Seeing nobody, 'Where?' said he.

She pointed vaguely down the passage. 'I was lying awake,' she explained in a gasping whisper, 'and, not five minutes ago, some one came stealing along in the dark. He didn't know his way, I think, for he drew his hand along the wall as he went, and touched the fastening of my door—oh, Percival! But he went on, and when I heard him turn to the left, I hurried out and ran to your door to wake you, but it was open, and I said, "Percival," and you didn't speak. And then I heard someone coming upstairs, and I

thought it was another of them, and I tried to scream, but I couldn't. And all at once I knew it was you, and I looked round. And if it hadn't been—I should have gone mad that moment !'

'My poor child !' said Thorne, tenderly. Sissy had ended her speech on the threshold of his room, and as he spoke he had a pistol in his hand. She followed him mutely to her own door. 'Wait here for me,' he said. 'I daresay there may be nothing wrong. Don't be frightened. Stay—perhaps you might as well turn the key in the lock till I come.'

The trembling little girl of a moment before flashed a steady, scornful look at him : 'No, no !'

He was turning to go. His olive cheek was a shade paler than usual, his lips were firmly set, his eyes shining with a fierce excitement which was almost pleasure. Men have so few opportunities now of satisfying their warlike instincts, and rejoicing in their strength, compared with the opportunities of the old days.

'Take care ! Oh, Percival, take care !'

The agony in her tone was not to be mistaken. For all answer he stooped and kissed her lips. As he lifted his head, he

heard the sound of footsteps groping along a distant passage. With one quick glance, he was gone.

She stood where he left her, sick with a double terror. Fear of the unknown enemy was mixed up with fear of the very weapon which Percival carried, for she was aware of the deadly accuracy with which firearms are wont to point themselves at their possessors. She listened, in a strained agony of expectation, for a report, a heavy fall, and the sudden clamour of the awakened house—but nothing came. For a moment she fancied there was a slight confusion of hurrying steps, but then, listen as she would, all was still. She did not pray, but it seemed to her that she *was* a prayer—for Percival.

Hark! a footfall in the long passage, cautious and light, but coming swiftly towards her. Ah, thank God! It was he, and all was well.

He was laughing when he came round the corner, but he was angry too. If your courage and excitement are at boiling point, it is all very well to start off on a perilous quest at three o'clock on a November morning. But if the adventure suddenly collapses to absurd dimensions, a little anger is not only natural enough, but needful to

enable you to resist the universal chill. Percival would hardly have laughed if he had not been angry. She looked her questions.

'It was that idiotic young footman of yours—George,' said Thorne, in a whisper.

'What—does he walk in his sleep?'

'Not he. Shouldn't mind that so much, if he would be kind enough not to walk in yours. The idiot was going to fasten the landing window just over the porch.'

Sissy stared in silent amazement.

'Duncan told him to do it in the afternoon. As he was going he was called away for something else, and never went. Just at dinner-time Duncan asked if it were done. The coward said "Yes," meaning to go directly he was free, but forgot it till about half-an-hour ago he woke and it flashed upon him. Instantly he imagined a stream of burglars pouring steadily in at the undefended spot. Even if none came, Duncan might discover his negligence to-morrow, and—he shook so,' said Percival, 'that we were not able to pursue that branch of the subject. So he got up and started off to see after it.'

'But is that true?' questioned Sissy.

'Because, you know, this wouldn't be the proper way.'

‘The proper way led him past Duncan’s door. Better wander all over the house than pass that.’

‘And was it unfastened?’

‘The window? Yes. It’s fastened now, and the poor wretch has gone back half dead with fright. He certainly thought his last hour had come.’

‘Poor fellow,’ said Sissy. ‘What did you do to him?’

‘Well,’ said Percival, with a leisurely smile, ‘if you must know, I remembered your poor little white face and—swore at him. Since when I have been thinking what a blessing it is I don’t swear as a rule. If I were in the habit of saying—but there is no need for illustrations, perhaps—every time I opened my lips, I should never have thought twice about it, while now I have quite an invigorating feel of having *done* something—adopted a resolute line of action, you know. And I think George feels so too.’

‘Is swearing as nice as that? I think I must take to it,’ Sissy whispered. ‘I want some excitement sometimes. Oh, dreadfully!’

Percival was thinking how wonderful her hair was, all hanging loose, the colour of a

newly ripened chestnut at the curling tips, and with here and there a strand of living gold. He laughed and said :

'You don't want any more excitement to-night, you've had too much already. I'll teach you to swear to-morrow, if you like. Go back to bed now.'

'I suppose I must,' was her reluctant reply. 'I feel as if I would rather not go to sleep any more.'

He glanced over his shoulder. 'I expect every minute that Aunt Harriet or my grandfather will be getting up a burglar hunt in their turn, and we shall have to be the burglars.'

She hesitated. Percival stood looking at her. He knew she was beautiful, he had seen it many a time, that very afternoon when she came down the stairs, for instance. But he had never felt before as if something in Sissy's beauty appealed to something in him, which thrilled in swift response. He could hardly keep his eyes from betraying the admiration which would have been an insult at that time and place, and he studiously controlled his voice as he reiterated his command, 'Go back now, Sissy—go.'

'Percival, don't laugh at me. If that window was open, some one might have got in.'

‘Some one *might*, certainly.’

‘And he may be lurking about somewhere now.’

‘He *may*, but it isn’t likely.’

Sissy hung her head. ‘I’m very stupid, but I don’t think I could quite stand another fright to-night.’

‘It would be too much to expect,’ said Thorne. ‘You’ve behaved like a heroine. A gleam of pleasure crossed the drooping face. ‘But there’s no occasion for any more heroic qualities just now. I am not going to bed “till daylight doth appear,” at any rate, not till the maids set to work with their scrubbing brushes and brooms—that’s the first indication of dawn in November, isn’t it? So if you can’t rest in peace, I shall be compelled to suppose you don’t think me able to take care of you.’

‘Oh, but don’t sit up just because I’m foolish!’

He smiled. She knew very well that the smile expressed a resolution it was beyond her power to shake. ‘Shall you sleep, Sissy?’

‘So well.’ And she crept back to her little white nest. She *did* sleep. An overpowering necessity was upon her, since every waking moment implied a doubt of Percival.

And he went away to commence his watch. He felt something like a true knight keeping his vigil, only the knighthood had come before, at the touch of Sissy's lips. He thought more of that hurried kiss than she had yet done. Terror first, and then her anxiety lest his watchfulness should be in vain, kept her from looking back, till remembrance flashed upon her with the first gleam of morning, and brought the hot colour to her face. But Percival recalled it as he sat that night in his room.

Why had he done it? He could not tell. The impulse had been too swift for even a glimpse of its cause. What did it matter? It was done.

It was not a slight thing in Percival's thoughts. His destiny had been swaying in the balance, needing just a little more, in one scale or the other, to determine it. He had felt as if the decision required an effort he was too indolent to make, and he rejoiced that his momentary impulse had settled it without a thought. For if Sissy's lips had spoken for an hour, they could not have told him as much as that swift midnight touch had done, and the betrayal of her love had been the revelation of his own.

Horace had kissed her many a time from

her childhood onwards. Master Horace was not chary of his kisses ; he had an idea that, as he had no sister, other girls were bound to make good the deficiency. But to Percival's composed lips and sombre eyes nothing slighter than passionate kisses of eternal rapture or farewell—a life's devotion comprehended in a glance—would have seemed appropriate. He was hardly prepared to act up to this exalted ideal, perhaps, but instinct told him that it was not for him to traffic in the small change of love making. The touch of his lips was a pledge, and he had given it that November night. It was well. It seemed that he was not capable of a great passion which could enable him to scale the world, to stand with the woman he loved above it all, and look down to see it spinning at his feet. There had been brief moments when such a thing had seemed possible. Moments of moonlight madness, when, if he banished sleep, he could not free himself from her host of circling dreams. But they had vanished now, and given place to a final wakefulness of soul, in which he judged himself incapable of any stronger love than that which he felt for Sissy. At the thought of her his heart leapt up in protecting tenderness, and the grave lips curved in an involun-

tary smile. 'As pure and sweet as a flower,' he thought; 'and—God help her!—as delicate.'

Percival recognised the fact that at four o'clock in the morning it would not do to begin singing

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve,

though nothing would have expressed his feelings better. There would have been a happy smiling stress on the 'If,' which, even while emphasising the word, would have rendered it almost unnecessary. As he could not sing it, he murmured it under his breath, glowing with a defiant consciousness of power at the second line. He had no misgivings. As he guarded his lady through that dreary night, he royally decreed that a blaze of sunshine should light her path henceforward. He would spend himself for his darling little Sissy; in very truth he would 'die ere she should grieve,' though he smiled to think that his death would be the one unconquerable grief. His knowledge had been gained from Sissy's eyes that night.

Where now was the man who had declared that being a drone, with but a scanty income, he could ask no girl richer than himself to share his life? Leaning idly back,

in his armchair, secure of winning Sissy, with her eight hundred a year—where was that old resolution, uttered so earnestly in a by-gone June? Or where were those soft June shadows this black November night?

After all, the change in his sentiments was more apparent than real. He had meant, 'I could not go an empty-handed idler to Judith Lisle,' and that was true in November as in June. But he had dressed up his intensely personal idea as a general principle, to make it more fit for society, not meaning to deceive anyone, but mechanically, as he would have put on his dress-coat for a dinner party. It was not a general principle, however; it did not apply to Sissy. If he were a drone, she was the idlest of butterflies, and he felt no shame that the share of gold which chance had allotted to him was somewhat less than hers. Perhaps it would not be smaller in the end, for Percival who had shrunk from making the least claim on his grandfather, lest it should be acknowledged, and met by a counter claim which might abridge his liberty, was thinking, as he sat sketching Sissy's future and his own, that after all he had rights.

A housemaid yawning loudly, and sounding very slipshod as she came down the

passage, stumbled over his boots outside the door, and recovered herself and her candlestick with a clatter.

'Aurora!' thought Percival. 'Rosy fingered with chilblains, no doubt, and come to end my vigil.'

Ten minutes later he was fast asleep, and with the strange perversity of dreams, neither Sissy Langton nor Judith Lisle passed through his visions that night. Instead of them, came Lottie Blake, her wide clear eyes fixed on him, her briar-scratched hand held out in greeting, and the red cap flung on the blackness of her hair.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE IN A MIST.

IF it were possible for us to look into the future, there would be, I imagine, a considerable increase of rather bitter humour in our lives, and a considerable falling off in sentiment. We should suddenly grow very old, while yet young and vigorous, and should be left without that tenderness for our vanished youth which naturally belongs to old age.

Percival, as he dressed, was thinking of Horace, of Brackenhill, of Sissy, of Parliament. Should he stand for Fordborough or not? He debated the question, all unconscious of the ironical smile worn by the veiled future, standing very close at hand. Will you be M.P. for Fordborough? Consider it well, Percival. Twelve months hence you may, with equal benefit to yourself and your friends, consider whether you will be the Man in the Moon.

No; he thought not. He was indolent to the core, and the contest would be a weariness to him. But he would not say so. He was too conscious of his indolence to use the languid manner so much in vogue. Still he thought not. He was fastidious, and it occurred to him that the Fordborough roughs would probably throw things at him, and call him by some coarse and foolish nickname. Again a motive not to be avowed. Who could own that his political career was cut short by the fear of a rotten egg? Finally, he thought of a certain Fordborough tradesman who must be canvassed, a stout and unctuous grocer, who professed to hold very advanced views, and who would rejoice—Percival instinctively felt how offensively the man would rejoice—over the conversion of the Tory Squire of Brackenhill. 'I don't know how my grandfather would stand it,' he mused; 'I believe I should pledge myself to ultra-Conservatism on the spot. I can't do it.' But even here was no motive which could be put forward to represent the rest. How could he say, 'I will not stand in the Liberal interest because Mr. Simpkin would be pleased?' Yet add to these three reasons, the fact that Sissy was making his level life ripple very pleasantly with

excitement and speculation, so that he had no need to look elsewhere for interest, and you will have the causes, as far as he could make them out, which led to Percival's decision. And I do not suppose that he was the first who has been bothered by having a host of small motives, when all he wanted was one that was big enough to be acknowledged.

I do not intend to conceal any folly of Percival's. When he had dressed, he stood and looked at himself in the glass, with interest, and a little pardonable vanity. The mirror gave him back the portrait of a fine young fellow with a dark intense face. People did not consider him as handsome as Horace. He knew in his own heart that he was not as handsome. Some might look at Horace who would never look at him, but whoever really looked at him would look again. He smiled and went downstairs, singing to himself, 'If she love me, this believe.' Duncan was in the hall scolding George. The butler paused when he heard approaching footsteps, and the poor victim stole an anxious glance at young Mr. Thorne, who went by with his head high, looking so prosperous and unconcerned. Percival kept a strictly neutral expression on his face. '*I'm* not going to forgive the idiot for frightening Sissy half out of her wits,' he

thought. 'At the same time, if she wants the poor wretch spared'—and he opened the door of the breakfast-room, and went into the pleasant glow of warmth, and the fragrance of coffee. Sissy greeted him with a heightened colour and averted eyes. Aunt Harriet was not happy till he was established at her elbow, in a convenient place for petting. The dear old lady was still half afraid that he might have thought her unkind the night before.

Percival ate and drank, looked up and laughed. 'Aunt Harriet,' he said, 'tell me how you remember people you have met. I think of their height, features, voice and walk, but I fancy you think of them something in this fashion: Mr. Smith, tea very sweet—great weakness for red mullet—thinks all fruit unwholesome, with the exception of peaches. Or—Miss Jones—likes muffins—detests curry—remarkably fond of raspberry cream. Isn't it so?'

Mrs. Middleton smiled. 'Oh, I generally remember what people say they like.'

'Pardon me,' said Percival decidedly; 'but it isn't that. That is nothing—worse than nothing—sometimes it is sickening. I was in a house once where, being very hungry, I praised some minced veal which they gave

me. The next day there was a further supply of minced veal, merely as an ornamental companion to an unpleasant dish, which they thought delicious. I had no alternative. Instantly it was decided that there was nothing I should like so well at all times as a dish of minced veal. They rush and kill the fatted calf for me the moment they hear of my coming, as if I were the Prodigal Son, not reflecting that even he didn't have to eat the entire animal minced. Besides, he had the advantage of me, for he was half starved. I feel their kindness, I love them for it, and I shall never cross their threshold again, unless there should be an unparalleled outbreak of rinderpest.'

'I should think not,' said Aunt Harriet; 'I could tell better than that.'

'Of course you could,' he smiled; 'yours is not knowledge, it is sympathy. Some fine tact tells you *when* one likes a thing. You can distinguish between a moment's whim and a lasting passion.'

Mrs. Middleton poured some milk into a saucer for her favourite cat. 'Ah! if I could only judge like that in other things, what a wise woman I should be!'

'And how we should all hate you!' said Percival. 'No, no; let us believe every

whim eternal, since we must needs swear that it is so.'

The door opened, and Mr. Thorne came in with his hands full of newspapers. He could scarcely find time to greet Mrs. Middleton and Sissy, he was so eager to show his grandson what was said of old Bridgman and the probable future of Fordborough. But the young man hardly glanced at the paragraphs. 'I must have a word with you, sir,' he said.

'Yes?' the Squire questioned. 'Well, that's right. To tell you the truth, Percival, I've wanted a word with you for some time. We must settle things a little.'

The younger Thorne, looking up, caught a glance from Sissy's dilated eyes. It brought to his memory the frightened look which George the footman fixed on him as he passed through the hall. He could not help it. The scared expression was the same in both, but he was angry with himself that anything in Sissy's beautiful face should remind him of that lout. And why was she ill at ease? It should not be for long.

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve.

He followed his grandfather to the library. The old man sat down; but Percival chose to

stand, with his elbow on the chimney-piece, and his eyes fixed on the restless little flames which licked a half-burnt log. 'I've made up my mind not to try for the Fordborough seat,' he said.

'Eh? Why not?' Mr. Thorne had lain awake a great part of the night, foreseeing wounds to his pride, and half-inclined to regret the offer he had made. But when Percival quietly put it aside, he was disappointed. 'What are your reasons?' he reiterated.

'Such small ones that the real reason must be, that I don't take a deep interest in political questions,' Percival replied. 'They would be as dust in the balance, if there were any weight in the opposite scale. There is none, and they have turned it.'

'I'm sorry,' said the other, curtly.

His grandson turned and looked curiously at him. 'Why, you cannot really *wish* for a Radical at Fordborough. And if it's only on my account——'

'I'm sorry,' Godfrey Thorne repeated. 'I think I hoped that you would settle down, give up your wandering life, have an ambition, and look forward a little. But it seems it is not to be.'

'I needn't contest a borough for that, surely,' said the young man, with a smile.

'If I could only see you married,' his grandfather went on. 'You are the last of us all, Percival, do you ever think of that? In the natural course of things you will outlive poor Horace—and then?'

'Horace will come back strong and well, I hope, and live to have sons of his own,' said Percival. He spoke the more energetically that he felt a sudden assurance that what his grandfather said was true, and that he would be the last of the Thornes, and the final heir of the beautiful old manor house, which year by year he was learning to love.

'Horace have sons? Poor sickly things, like their father and his father,' Godfrey answered bitterly. 'Nipped and dying off, like plants in an east wind. No, no, Percival, I must be very hopeful, or very despairing, when I take to building on that.'

The young man was saying to himself, 'Since I have decided, better seal my decision.' So he replied, 'You build on me, then? Very good. But whether I marry or not, doesn't depend on me.'

Mr. Thorne was on his feet in a moment, stammering in his eagerness, 'What, what? On me, then? Is it money you are thinking of, Percival?'

The younger Thorne remained as before,

with his head a little bent. 'Mine's only a bachelor's income, I suppose,' he said. 'And yet it doesn't depend on you. I'm going to ask Sissy if she'll have me. If she will, I might lose my last penny, and it would only make her cling to me the more. And if she won't—why, all Brackenhill in my hand wouldn't help me.'

He was so careful not to betray the easy confidence which filled his heart, that his last words had quite a despondent ring in them, and the Squire was very much alarmed. However, he declared what he would do for the young couple. 'I'll make it all right on the wedding-day—you shall have as much as Sissy, or more if you want it. And afterwards—you must wait till the old man dies, Percival, not very long now, not very long. Must hold the reins to the last. But then I think you'll be satisfied. I *think* so.'

'I don't think I want so much that I am very hard to satisfy,' said his grandson.

'That you are not! I wish you were harder, sometimes; I want you to ask and have. Horace can ask fast enough when he wants anything, and Sissy can come smiling and coaxing for her pretty little whims; but never you, my boy. Never once.'

'And never will,' said the young fellow to

himself. He was touched by the sorrowful longing of the old Squire's tone, but he set his face like a flint, and steeled his heart against it. 'I should be scorned as soon as won,' thought he. So far as he must sacrifice his independence for Sissy's sake, he would do it, but he would ask for nothing, and he was resolved to take nothing but what was offered unconditionally.

'You're too proud to give the old man the little bit of pleasure he wants, just the thought that you can't get on without him, that you count on him, and come to him in any need. When you first set foot in my house, a solemn boy, weighing out your words, and looking watchfully about you, I said, "Ah, well! wait awhile. He doesn't know his old home and his old grandfather yet—he'll thaw soon." But you never have. You stand aloof, and hold me at arm's length. I was hard on your father, it's true; but after all, he wouldn't have had Brackenhill, would he? You'll outlive me—I've wronged you, no doubt. But I'll do all I can—more than you think, perhaps, to make amends. Can't you forgive me?'

'I have nothing to forgive,' said Percival, loftily. 'All that my father lost was well lost, for my mother's sake. It was a fair bargain: he to go his way, and you yours.'

Neither he nor I complain of it, as he would tell you, were he living now. I make no claim, sir, and I never will.'

'But you will not refuse to take what I give you,' the other entreated.

Percival's mind was made up, yet he hesitated. His independence seemed slipping through his fingers, and, like most things, was dearest at the moment of loss. 'No, I won't refuse,' he said at last. 'Yet stay. On what conditions do you offer it?'

'None. You shall be as free as before.'

Percival shook his head. 'Impossible.'

'But you shall. It shall be yours absolutely. You shall do what you please with it.'

'And suppose I do anything which displeases you'—Percival began.

'You will not displease me,' said the Squire. 'And nothing shall make any difference.'

'It must make a difference,' murmured Percival.

'Upon my word!' Mr. Thorne exclaimed. 'You're the hardest man to deal with I ever came across. Tell me what *would* please you, if you will be so kind. Anything that comes from dead and gone Percivals, I suppose, and nothing that comes from me. Say

what you will, though, you're a Thorne after all, and isn't it right and fit that you should have something from Brackenhill ?'

(O wonderful concession from Godfrey Thorne, that any human being had right to part or lot in Brackenhill !)

'You needn't fear,' he went on. 'I'll ask but one thing from you in return.'

'Ah !' And Percival turned swiftly, and fixed his great eyes on him. The cloven foot was peeping out at last, he thought. 'And that is——?' he demanded.

'That you'll be happy.'

'Oh ! Well, to accommodate you, I'll try,' said Percival, forgetful that happiness, like sleep, comes not with trying. 'But it all depends on Sissy, you know.'


Did it ? He asked himself the question, as he crossed the hall in search of her. He thought it did. But who could tell what would be for his happiness, say in seven years' time. This, however, he knew, that he wanted Sissy, wanted to pet her, and call her his own, to lift her out of her mysterious sorrow, set her on high, his queen and darling, and do battle for her with all the world, if need were. In love with her ? Deeply ? Passionately ? Of course he was. But Mr. Percival Thorne had surely no busi-

ness to be able to speculate concerning the nature and duration of happiness, as he went on his way that morning!

Not in the drawing-room. Not in the breakfast-room. Not in her own little sitting-room, upstairs, where he had the right of entry. In the hall lay a soft felt hat of his, which Mrs. Middleton hated because she said it made him look like a brigand. He caught it up and went out into the garden.

It was a foggy, slate-coloured day, with a faint breeze, which came now and then like a long-drawn sigh. The evergreens dropped heavy tears upon the sodden soil. The dull curtain of cloud hung so low that it forced you to wonder what it concealed. It was impossible to imagine that the arch of sunny blue could be behind it; it rather seemed as if it must veil some ghastly whiteness. Percival, who came out whistling a tune, paused, looked up at the clouds, and round at the dank and dripping world, and, after a useless search on the terrace and in the conservatory, went with noiseless steps across the spongy turf. 'Sissy has no business out to-day,' he thought, 'I'll bring her in. Why, one might paint the whole thing with a wash of Indian ink, then wipe most of it out again with a wet sponge, and the result would be a tolerably

faithful representation of this delicious atmospheric effect.' His short cut had brought him to a high yew hedge, through which he passed into a sheltered enclosure, formal and trim, where old traditions lived from year to year in newly springing green. That it looked dreary was a proof of the utter dreariness of the day, for Percival had noticed many a time that if a stray sunbeam found its way within those walls of green, it seemed to be entangled there, and to linger, feebly brightening the stiff hedges, the yellow paths, and the bushy borderings of box, when there was no sunlight anywhere else. Even to-day the clipped yews were a little less mournful than sweeping cedars on the lawn. 'Upon my word,' said Percival to himself, 'our ancestors, barbarous though their taste might be, understood gardening for a foggy November day. For clearness of outline in this universal smear, give me two pepper-boxes, a lion, and a dolphin, when old Knowles has lately been at them with his shears.' He passed the fountain in the middle, whose once white stone had been softened by time to mossy grey-green. 'What a merciful thing it isn't spouting now,' he thought, with a shiver, eyeing the portly presiding Neptune over his shoulder as he



went by. 'A fellow ought to put on a blue coat, and powder his hair, to do his courting here. Sissy!'

No answer. Percival and Neptune had the winter garden all to themselves. When he had convinced himself of this fact, he tilted the soft hat a little more over his brows, and stood with his hands deep in his pockets, a very nineteenth-century figure indeed, lost in profound thought, and staring at the dolphin. Should he seek further or not? An armchair by the fireside would be very comfortable, and where to look for Sissy next he hardly knew. But the slight check had quickened his eagerness, and he started again in search of her, determined not be baffled, though he should have to cross the park, and look for her in the village.

He had hardly made up his mind to this when he found her. All at once he came in sight of a melancholy little figure, wandering to and fro, and he stopped to look, himself unseen.

It was a lonely part of the grounds, half kitchen garden half orchard, and Sissy paced slowly along a mossy path, with apple and cherry boughs above her head. It was not a cheerful place. Percival remembered that he had liked and praised it once in the spring,

when buds were swelling on the trees, and strong green shoots were pushing through the earth. It was fairer yet when the angular branches overhead were heaped with faintly flushed flowers, or loaded with the snow of cherry blossom. But now blossom and fruit alike were gone, and only a few poor leaves, yellowing and coarse, hung feebly on the boughs, and shook against the curtain of dull grey. Under them, weary, yet restless, went the little figure, pacing to and fro.

Percival stood gazing. To him there came a little gust of wind with a startled shiver, and departed as it came. The silence which followed was so strangely sad that the glowing fervour of his glance was quenched, and it grew resolute and grave.

'Sissy !' he called aloud ; ' Sissy !'

She turned her head slowly and lifted great pathetic eyes, full of the apprehensive expression they had learned of late. As he came forward, with the shadow on his dark face, she shrank a little, as if he had frightened her, not stepping back, but drawing herself together. In another moment, however, she had recovered her self-possession, and greeted him with a faint smile. He smiled in answer, and turned to walk by her side. The frightened look gradually forsook her

eyes, only to come back with his first words.

They had walked almost the length of the path in silence, but near the further end Percival halted, and stood kicking a pebble which was embedded in the ground. 'Sissy,' he said (she had also paused, two or three steps away, half lingering, half longing to escape); 'Sissy, tell me what's the matter with you. You are as different as night from day from what you used to be. You are like the girl in *Auld Robin Grey*. You "gang like a ghaist," Sissy, and you "carena much to spin." Why is it so, dear?'

'I suppose that means that I don't often do any tatting now. Percival, I don't think I ever did care much about it. It isn't good for anything when it's done.'

He took a step towards her. 'You were always an idle little woman, weren't you?' he said gently. 'But you used to be so bright. And now——' After a moment's pause he spoke in a tone of abrupt command. 'Sissy, lift your head—look up at me. Ah! you can't. Your eyes are full of tears.'

They brimmed over and fell, tears of childish compassion for herself.

'Tell me, dear,' he went on, resuming

his former manner. 'can I help you in any way ? Is anything wrong ?'

She shook her head.

'But there must be,' he persisted gravely. 'Don't you see how sad the whole house is because you are unhappy ?'

'Don't tease me so,' she said hurriedly. Then, 'Oh, Percival, be good to me—don't scold me !'

'Scold you — never !' A beseeching little hand had been laid on his sleeve, and quick as thought his own had covered and clasped the quivering fingers. 'Be good to you ! I love you far too well to be anything else. Sissy, let me be *good* to you always. Will you marry me, dear ; and whatever troubles may be in store for us, let us face them together ?'

It was briefly spoken in Percival's earnest voice. There was no need for many words.

She looked up into his face, and he was startled by her perplexed and frightened glance. But the next moment it had vanished, and she let him draw her to him, and laid her cheek on his shoulder, as if she had found her happy resting-place at last.

When he lifted his head again it seemed to him that a slight but unmistakeable charge

had passed over the sorrowful landscape. The autumn leaves which shook against the sky were surely stirred by a faint yet most tender breath of spring. The heavy veil of grey was lifted a little, and lightened by a yellow gleam. There was something vernal even in the damp and chilly air; and Percival would hardly have been surprised had the garden-beds shown a few pale and leafless flowers, heralds of a bright array to come.

As they stood under the black orchard boughs, she was silent and clinging, he was confident and proud. The song which had haunted his midnight watch haunted him still, and he whistled it, with his arm round Sissy. 'What is that?' she said.

For all answer, instead of whistling, he softly sang—

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve,

and looked down at her with eloquent eyes.

'Does that mean me, Percival?'

'My darling girl,' laughed Percival, 'do you suppose it could possibly mean anyone else?'

She laughed too, and then sighed.

'So, you see,' he went on, 'we must be as happy as if our engagement commenced

on the very last page of a three-volume novel.'

'No, no,' said Sissy, 'I don't like that. Please, don't talk as if the romance were all done. No; I'll wish it to be at the beginning of a novel, not at the end.'

Percival assumed a tragic attitude of despair. Then he smiled again.

'Oh, the ill-omened wish! If a spiteful fairy should be hiding behind one of those apple-trees, we are ruined, Sissy, utterly undone! Don't you know that first-volume marriages *cannot* turn out well? They ought to be forbidden by Act of Parliament. Jealousy—weariness—misunderstandings—fiends, instead of friends—secrets of the most uncomfortable kind—do not all these belong to first-volume marriages? You get safer as you approach the end of the third; but the last paragraph is the best. The artist is tired, so he dashes in an expanse of cloudless blue—saves detail. The writer has had enough, so he scribbles in "rapture—bliss"—and would be glad to know what fault anyone can find with *that*. Never mind the romance, Sissy; it's sure to give one a brain fever, an accident or two, a hair's-breadth escape from the tide, and threads of silver in one's still abundant hair. Let's stick to the last page, where

there isn't even time to find out that we are quite different people to what we were always supposed to be.'

'What a shock it would be,' he went on, 'to have to practise a new signature—wouldn't one dream of being tried for forgery every night?—and to discover that one had two quite new grandmothers, perhaps, some uncles and aunts, and innumerable first and second cousins. What do you say, Sissy?'

'I think, perhaps, it had better be the last page,' she said, ignoring the fact that the decision hardly rested with her or with him. 'You mustn't change, anyhow, Percival; you must never change.'

'Everything changes,' said he, as he kicked the mossy stone from its resting-place. 'And everybody changes, except mummies. They don't, I suppose; but I hope I'm not a mummy. My foolish darling, don't look so sad and scared. Don't you know that the secret of love is that we shall change together, and always draw nearer?'

She smiled, but was only half convinced. 'Don't change *much* then,' she said, 'or I shan't keep pace with you.'

How often it happens that we cannot say what we should like to say. As they walked towards the house, Sissy would have liked to

say, 'Percival, why did you go to meet Miss Adelaide Blake, that night, in Langley Wood?' Not that it mattered now where he had been, or whom he had met, for she could never doubt Percival. Only, since it had troubled her once, she felt a little natural curiosity about it.

If the question had been put, it would have been met by a counter question from Percival; and most likely there would have been a little light thrown on a mystery or two, and a change effected in my hero's destiny. But for several reasons, the question was an impossible one, and Sissy contented herself with something more general.

'Why, no,' said Percival, in reply. 'I certainly won't say that I never thought anything about any girl before. And if I could say it, it would only prove me to be a dull cold-blooded fellow, I think. But, Sissy, it would be folly to compare my thoughts of any others, at any time, with my thoughts of you to-day.'

Sissy was content. As they drew near the house, she looked up at the window which had caused her so much anxiety a few hours earlier.

'No burglars came after all,' said Percival. 'You slept well? Ah! that's right. It was

more than Master George did, I'll be bound.'

'Have you said anything to Duncan or anybody?'

'Not yet.' The tone threatened a speedy disclosure.

There are things painful at the time they occur, but pleasant and even precious as memories. Sissy felt almost grateful to George.

'Don't say anything about it, please.'

'My dear child, your kindness would be utterly wasted,' said Percival. 'He will never do any good. He is much too stupid.'

'I feel just like that sometimes,' said Sissy, pensively.

'Good heavens you are not going to compare yourself to George, I hope!' Percival exclaimed, with the more heat because he remembered that likeness in their frightened eyes which had so annoyed him.

'Not, if you don't like it. But you don't mean to say "no" to the first thing I ask you——'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I yield, of course. George is spared; but, as he has no idea that he has alarmed anyone but myself, he will not know to whom he is indebted. Consequently, he will feel no gratitude; but,

comparing my resolute language of last night with my meek behaviour of to-day, he will decide that I am rather soft. Be it so. But why do you care about it, Sissy ?'

'I don't know. Only, somehow, I feel as if I shouldn't like a spider to be hurt to-day.'

He whistled. 'Oh! if it has come to *that*——'

For Sissy, who would cheerfully confront a caterpillar of the first magnitude, or a family party of earwigs collected for a great house-warming in a dahlia, or even a black beetle, if the tongs were very handy, had a horror of spiders. She could not account for it. 'Too many legs, don't you think?' she had said once, but she was reminded that when a large centipede walked straight at her out of a dish of filberts, and even the Squire was discomposed, she had calmly encountered and vanquished the intruder, without stopping to reckon the number of his legs. So she gave it up, only suggesting that she thought it *might* be that they were alike all round, and she didn't know which way they were going to run. At any rate the fact remained that she had a nervous horror of spiders, and always flew at one with the agonised ferocity which is born of extreme fear. So, when she

said she should not like a spider to be hurt, Percival knew that she was indeed in charity with all created things. And George was pardoned.

Mrs. Middleton heard of the engagement without much surprise, and with some pleasure. Her cherished day dream, the marriage of her two favourites, had already become a thing of the past. It had been very bright and real to her in old days, when Horace was a tall, handsome lad, who idolised little Sissy, carried her on his shoulders, bought presents for her with his pocket money, and spoiled her so that she cared for no one else while he was home for the holidays. Aunt Harriet could remember the dreadful night or two at the beginning of each quarter, when Sissy refused comfort and sobbed herself to sleep, only to dream that Horace had come back, and to awake and weep anew. But of late years, though at times she had hoped, I think she knew in her heart that it was in vain. What could have drawn Sissy away from Horace to Percival she could not imagine. Since, however, her dream was not to be realised, and in poor Horace's state of health she could not even wish it, she allowed that Percival Thorne would do as well as anyone else in

the neighbourhood. Better than young William Falconer, who was much too fond of billiards, or Harry Hardwicke, their lawyer's son, who was a nice fellow, and would be tolerably well off but was not overburdened with brains. Mrs. Middleton could not get rid of her old doubt whether she really knew Percival. But if Sissy liked him that was the principal thing, and the old lady believed that he might make her darling happy.

'You will take great care of her, won't you?' she said anxiously. 'And you won't be hard on her—promise me, Percival.'

'Hard on Sissy!' said the young fellow, after an interval of speechless amazement. 'What can you possibly be thinking of, Aunt Harriet? Shall I promise you at the same time that I won't murder your maid, nor brutally ill-use my grandfather?'

Mr. Thorne was delighted beyond expression. His great idea seemed to be that he must pet Sissy in some way, and he racked his brains to discover what would please her. She laughed at him. 'You would like to put an extra lump of sugar in my tea, wouldn't you?' she said. 'Or to spread some on my bread and butter. I know you would.'

'You are much too grown up for that, my dear.'

'I suppose I am. Oh, it's a dreadful thing—being grown up!'

'Is it? You don't mean that, Sissy, so I won't tell tales of you. What can we find to console you for having ceased to take pleasure in sugared bread and butter?'

'Percival does as well as anything,' said Sissy.

'No doubt. At the same time, is there any reason why we should not get some of the old diamonds reset?'

Her eyes were brighter than the promised stones. 'Percival likes diamonds—and—and—so do I!' And Mr. Thorne wrote to a jeweller on the subject that very day.

Godfrey Hammond heard of the approaching marriage, and said to himself, 'I told you so.' He would often take considerable trouble to bring about the events he predicted, merely that he might say those four words. In this case he had proved a true prophet without any effort on his part; so no doubt he was pleased, though he made no further remark than 'Happy pair—to be so young!' and proceeded to arrange the details of a select little dinner party.

Three people heard the news far away.
One laid down the letter, and said,

'So that is the end of all Master Percy's fine talk, and a very quick end too! He was never going to marry a girl with a farthing more than he had himself. Why, Sissy has eight hundred a year, if she has a penny!'

'And how do you know he has not as much as she has?' asked the lady by his side.

'He? Oh no! I know he hasn't anything like that. Oh—I see what you mean: Of course, I can't tell what the governor has done.'

'Old Aunt Middleton is very fond of Sissy, isn't she?'

'Fond of Sissy? I should think she was. Dear little Sissy, I hope she'll be happy.'

'Then, my dear boy, you have lost your last friend at Brackenhill.'

'Rubbish!' was the hasty answer. 'Why shouldn't she be my friend still, and Sissy too?'

'Oh well, of course they may, if your cousin Percival pleases. Perhaps he will.'

The first speaker turned impatiently away to the silent member of the party, who was looking out of the window with a preoccupied face, and who hardly moved at the touch of his hand.

‘And what do you say?’ he inquired.

‘Nothing.’

‘But you have been listening, haven’t you? I want you to say something.’

‘Then I will say this. Mr. Percival Thorne means to have everything his own way. And if you let him——’

CHAPTER XIX.

SISSY CONSULTS HER ORACLE.

I IMAGINE that a woman who has no fuss made about her wedding must feel much as a man might if he could wake up and find that he had eaten a good dinner while in a state of unconsciousness. The desired end would be attained in both cases ; she would be married, and he would be fed ; but I think the two sufferers would agree that it was attained in a most unsatisfactory way. Of course there are exceptions—women who do not care about orange blossoms and feeble speech-making, as there are men who eat to live—not to mention those who profess not to care. But Sissy belonged to neither division of exceptions. She liked the pomps and vanities of an orthodox wedding, and she owned it. White satin was the pomp which she especially desired, but she felt bound to consult Percival on the subject. 'Should you like me in that ?' she inquired.

He replied that he thought it very likely he should. That he liked her very well as far as he had gone, and would endeavour to preserve his sentiments unchanged, at any rate through the honeymoon.

Sissy sighed over his folly, and told him that she wouldn't say another word. But she went off to Aunt Harriet, and together they planned wedding raiment, which should fall in beautiful folds of sheen and shade.

Meanwhile Mr. Thorne was planning great rejoicings, dinner for all the tenants, a feast for the school children, flags, arches, bonfires, and fireworks. Mrs. Middleton would have been better pleased with these schemes had the bridegroom been anyone but Percival. Who would not suppose that these great doings marked the marriage of the heir?

'What then?' said the squire.

'But he is not your heir.'

'If he isn't, what does it signify? Let those laugh that win. Horace, for instance, when he wins.'

'You are having the diamonds set for Sissy!' Mrs. Middleton was divided between pleasure and vexation. It seemed like treachery to her absent favourite.

'Why not? I shall never like Horace's

wife as well as I like Percival's. Shall you ?'

She was silenced for the time. But, choosing a moment when Sissy was out of the way, she said, not exactly to Percival, yet in his hearing, 'I hope the wedding will be late enough in the year for Horace to be with us. I shouldn't like people to think that we made all this fuss as if he were of no account and never coming back.'

Mr. Thorne exclaimed angrily, 'Harriet! What are you talking about?—are you out of your mind? Of course he is coming back, some time or other. As to the wedding, I daresay we may manage to make it secure and legal either way.' But Percival vowed to himself that the day should be so fixed as to make sure of Horace's return.

He talked to Sissy about it, and she quite agreed with him. At least she said she did, and that in a very eager tone. So they decided that the wedding should be late in the spring or early in the summer. But why did he go away with the idea that there was an undercurrent of fear and anxiety in her mind, and that she would rather not see Horace among the guests? He pondered the matter awhile, and then told himself that he was a fool for his pains.

He ought to have been very happy that winter. He was devoted to Sissy, and was almost continually at Brackenhill. But he was anxious and uneasy. Even when he was in one of his silent moods he would follow her with his eyes, or pay her mute little attentions. However absent he might seem to be, he always heard when Sissy spoke, and never forgot what she said. He gave his mind wholly to the fulfilment of his pledge,

I will die ere she shall grieve,

and knew that he gave it in vain. For in her wayward April fashion Sissy was grieving still.

There were days when she was bright and laughing, others when she was shrinking and sad. Percival was baffled. He had expected to have his own way in everything, and intended to use his power wisely and tenderly for Sissy's good. Instead of which, she perplexed him. Formerly she denied that there was anything the matter with her. Now she changed her tactics, owned that she thought she was not very well, and thus accounted for low spirits and nervous fears. She was willing to see a doctor—two doctors—half a dozen, if they liked. But they were

very silly, she thought. If they left her alone, she would soon be all right, of course. She rather thought it was the weather. January was too cold, February was just as bad, March was too windy and bleak. In the latter month she put off her recovery for a little while, expressing a fear that April would be too showery—

‘And May too flowery, I suppose?’ said Percival, in a tone of tender chiding. ‘Oh, Sissy! Sissy!’

Whereupon a tear trembled on her lashes, and fell, and, clinging to him, she hid her face.

‘Dear,’ he said, ‘it isn’t the weather.’

‘Then what is it?’ said she, in her innocent voice.

And when he could only answer, ‘But, Sissy, that is what I want you to tell me,’ she clasped her slender hands about his neck, and drew his head down to hers.

‘I think you had better not take any notice of me,’ she said. ‘When I used to pull the flowers about in my little garden, and watered them every day, they never seemed to grow. You are all too good to me. I think you won’t let me get well.’

Percival smiled at her new theory, and promised to wait and see what time would

do. Nevertheless, he was disappointed. If a doctor prescribes a remedy which he believes to be infallible, it is disheartening, to say the least of it, to find it utterly useless. How much more if it happened to be his own heart's blood, his whole life and energy and devotion, which he had bestowed to heal his patient, and found it spent without result ?

One day at luncheon Mr. Thorne announced that he thought of making a slight alteration in the garden : nothing important ; just a fresh path, abolishing a border, and laying down a bit of turf. With the help of a water bottle and two decanters for trees, and some plates and knives and forks to represent other natural objects, he succeeded in making the nature of the proposed change clear to his sister.

‘ But you will do away with Horace’s border, as we always called it,’ she objected.

‘ The border by the tulip-tree ? Yes ; that goes, of course.’

‘ Oh, Godfrey ; you mustn’t do that ! Why I remember him, when he was quite a mite, digging away there in his little shirt-sleeves, and how hot he used to get over it, to be sure ! I can see him now leaning on his little spade while he wiped his face, and then setting to work again like——’ Mrs. Middleton looked

vaguely round for a comparison—'like anything! And growing radishes and mustard and cress there! Oh, Godfrey, you don't remember!'

'Yes,' said Mr. Thorne, who had been mechanically replacing the materials of his plan in their original positions. 'Yes, I do. I can vouch for the substantial accuracy of your interesting recollections. If my memory serves me, the salad was brought to table by Horace himself, and was gritty.' As he spoke, he poured some sherry from the decanter which had been the tulip-tree. 'I want a gravel-path,' he said, and sipped his wine.

'Alter your gravel-path then, and have it by all means,' was the quick reply. 'Anywhere, but through poor Horace's border.'

Mr. Thorne quietly began to construct his plan anew. 'Through the pond with Sissy's pet water-lilies, my dear? Or shall I cut down the great beech-tree? Or demolish the old sun-dial?'

'Then do without your gravel-path. You have plenty of gravel-paths without making any more.'

'Quite true. But I have a fancy for this one, and as Horace has given up digging—What do you say, young people? You, Percival?'

‘I am sure that Horace would be the first to agree to your path, if he were here. I am quite certain he would not object. At the same time, isn’t it a pity to uproot old memories? They grow slowly, and won’t bear transplanting.’

‘Well, *you* haven’t committed yourself, at any rate,’ said Mrs. Middleton. ‘Isn’t that a comfort?’

‘A great comfort.’ A slight smile flickered over his face, and he went on with his luncheon.

‘Percival is right,’ said Mr. Thorne. ‘Horace wouldn’t care. In fact, I think he would rather not do his sowing—mustard and cress—wild oats—whatever it may be, so immediately under my eyes nowadays. And as to old memories, they don’t grow in that border. Nothing grows there, except verbenas and mignonette, which are none of Horace’s planting. You may just as well walk along my path and think of him in his shirt sleeves, eating cress in the sweat of his brow, as look at those flowers and do it.’

‘Much you know about it!’ said Aunt Harriet, in a tone of lofty scorn. ‘I’ll trouble you for a glass of that Madeira, Godfrey. You do understand wine.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Squire, with a quick

little bow. There was a moment's pause, one of those pauses which may mean anything or nothing, and may end abruptly in anger or laughter. He broke the silence.

'Arbitration is the thing—don't all the papers say so? We will amicably refer the matter to Sissy. As she has not yet spoken, she shall decide.'

'Sissy, indeed!' Aunt Harriet looked fondly at the silent girl. 'My dear, you are eating nothing; do let me——'

'No bribery! She must be an impartial judge.'

'As if you didn't know she would say what Percival says! Of course.'

'I defy her to hold the balance so evenly, to blow hot and cold so accurately,' laughed Mr. Thorne. 'Yes or No? Now, Sissy, must the border be kept as an everlasting memorial of Horace and his cress, or may I have my gravel-path—such a nice gravel-path, and you shall walk on it? Which is it to be?'

Sissy kept her eyes on her plate, but her answer came without a moment's hesitation, low yet distinct.

'You may have your path.'

'Oh, Sissy!' Mrs. Middleton exclaimed, in a tone of pained reproach. Even Percival

uttered a little exclamation of surprise and pushed away his plate. Sissy's voice had been constrained, yet so resolute. Mr. Thorne half smiled, and leaning towards her, said, almost in a whisper,

‘You and I think much the same about Master Horace, I fancy.’

She looked him full in the face. ‘I’m not so sure of that!’ she said aloud; and suddenly rising, she left the room.

They all exchanged glances, anxious to read and not to be read. Mrs. Middleton’s face softened. ‘I don’t think Sissy is very well, to-day,’ she said. And after a few minutes, when they left the table, she went in search of her.

Opening the door of the little sitting-room, she walked in without knocking.

The girl started to her feet, sweeping a quantity of papers together. ‘What do you want? Oh, Aunt Harriet! I didn’t see—I beg your pardon.’ As she spoke she thrust some of the loose sheets into a shabby little writing-case. But the old lady recognised them. They were from Horace, the carefully penned letters which the schoolboy had sent to the little girl, who could not ‘read writing,’ as the children say, mixed with the scrawled notes of later days.

'My dear ; what are you doing ?' said Aunt Harriet, and took her in her arms and kissed her.

'I thought you would be angry with me,' said Sissy.

'I was surprised, I think. But you were quite right, dear ; Godfrey had better have his path ; he wants it, and I was only foolish about it.'

'I'll never walk on it!' said Sissy. 'Never!'

'Ah! You didn't want poor Horry's border done away? I thought you couldn't.'

'Yes, I did. Don't ask me any questions, please,' and she disengaged herself, and turned away.

'But, Sissy, I must ask you one thing. You didn't wish it, I am sure, though you said it was to be. Was it because you thought it would please Percival?'

'Oh, no! no! it was all my own doing. Percival wouldn't have said it, and wouldn't have wished it. I did it all myself.'

'I can't understand you!' said poor Aunt Harriet. 'Tell me what you mean, darling. It was your own wish? Then why——' and she looked at the papers crushed in the case, and scattered on the table.

Sissy tried hard to keep her voice level,

but it was quavering and insecure. 'I think he'll die,' she said. And flying past Aunt Harriet, she took refuge in her bedroom, where the old lady judged it inexpedient to pursue her.

About this time Sissy used to ask Percival questions *à propos* of nothing that he could make out. Once she attacked him on the old subject of heroism.

'You won't ever expect me to be a heroine, will you?' she said. 'You know how weak and silly I am. I shall never be like Charlotte Corday, Percival.'

'Heaven forbid that you should!' said he. Thus, to Sissy's relief, he accepted the fact that his future wife would never have nerve enough to go and stab anybody, in a most satisfactory manner. He was less of a hero in his own thoughts, and shrank from his old dream of a woman of the heroic type. 'No, no!' he said. 'Those startling women are all very well—but not to marry.'

'I thought you liked Charlotte Corday so much.'

'I admire her after a fashion. But, dear, you have put it out of my power to play the part of Adam Lux.'

'Who was he?'

Percival told her of the love which burst into flower as the sentence was spoken; and

the death-cart went its way through the curses of the mob. Girl-like, though she was half repelled by Charlotte, she was ready to weep over this man who had loved her. She sat with her hands in her lap, pondering the life which kindled so suddenly to a blaze of melancholy passion, and came to so swift an end; as if one should be consumed by a spark from a far-off star!

'But why do you think so much about Charlotte Corday?' asked Percival.

'I don't; only I wanted to make sure that you quite understand what I am. You do, don't you?'

'My darling, I should hope I did by this time.'

(As if it were a slight thing to understand a fellow-creature! But it is a remarkable fact, that people are equally certain that they understand, and that they are never understood.)

Another day she found him sitting by the fireside, with a paper, trying to work out a chess problem. She stole her hand round his elbow, and took away a knight. He captured her retreating fingers, replaced his piece, and went on musing with her hand in his. Their two glances—his intent, hers absent—were fixed upon the board.

At last she sighed. 'What is it?' said he, not looking up.

'I want to know something.'

'I want to know many things. For instance, why does this man say, "White to move, and mate in three moves," when I can't manage anything but a stalemate? What business has he to be cleverer than I am?' He stared at the opposing forces for a minute. 'Bah! I can't see it;' and, pushing back his chair, he raised his eyes. 'Let's hear your puzzle; it may be easier to solve.'

She passed her hand lightly over his strong waves of hair. 'Percival, when people are just dead——'

He arched his brows a little.

——'do they know what we are saying and thinking about them?'

'Your problem is far more difficult than mine. I can't tell you, Sissy.'

'But do tell me what you think,' she entreated.

'I don't know what to think. I don't suppose they feel the affairs of our world to be half as important as we imagine them. I fancy, for instance, that a great man just entering on a new existence, with all its possibilities, *must* have something better to do

than to sit down, cross his legs (I speak figuratively), and read the obituary notices in all the papers.'

Sissy was not satisfied. 'You think they wouldn't care; but could they know if they liked? Because there are some things they would care about?'

'Of course there are.'

'Suppose a man had done something unkind to his friend, and hidden it,' Sissy went on. 'If the friend died, would he know all about it?'

'How can I tell?' he mused; 'as if a dead chief should see in a lightning-flash that his trusted right-hand man was a traitor? Well, he might, Sissy; but he would see it differently, I think—more reasons for pardon, perhaps—a clearer understanding of motives.'

'Then, perhaps, he would not be so angry,' said Sissy, thoughtfully.

Percival did not heed, but after a moment went on.

'Some people are always longing for speech with those gone before, and are ready to snatch at anything which they think assures them that the old bonds are as closely knit as ever. That is why Spiritualism flourishes; and every medium finds a circle of believers, pining for news from the spirit

world. I hate the idea. Do they think our planet rolls on its way surrounded by a grey and misty atmosphere—for these things are done in the dusk—alive with phantoms? And these ghosts have nothing more urgent to do than to communicate in some imperfect fashion with those who still enjoy the daylight! Who would not rather think of them as far away, leaving the old world behind them like a dull little blot, doing new work with new energy, ready to meet us and to recognise us with clearer eyes than of old, as we in our turn emerge into the better life? Suppose you died, and left me, my little Sissy—I can't spare you, dear; you mustn't! would I not rather dream of you as utterly out of my reach, living perhaps in some distant star, than think that you, who have talked to me so often with your sweet lips and eyes and hands, were trying to explain your feelings with the help of a table, two or three chairs, a concertina, a bunch of flowers, and a half hysterical medium? The very idea is horrible! As if you should send me a kiss by the housemaid!

'Good gracious! Percival!' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, opening the door. 'What *are* you talking about?'

'Spiritualism, my dear aunt,' was the demure reply.

'H'm! Well, you know, I suppose;' and she eyed him doubtfully. 'It didn't sound very spiritual.'

'But that's its peculiarity,' he replied. 'It never does.'

And, laughing in his sleeve at her bewilderment, he gave no more thought to the question whence his discourse arose. And Sissy said no more, but extracted what comfort she could from the utterances of her oracle.

She needed further comfort a day or two later. The Rector's wife, who had known her ever since she came to Brackenhill, called suddenly upon her one afternoon. Mrs. Bradley was a good woman in her way, but it was a remarkably unpleasant way. She wished to be good—she tried to be good—and the result was, that she was an awful example of goodness. She would have been as invaluable to a scoffer as is an incorrigible drunkard to a temperance lecturer. She carried what she called 'the Truth' about with her as a weapon of offence. The text about giving an account of every idle word had entered into her very soul, and she brought it down like a sledge-hammer on every jest or airy bit of nonsense. She had always before her mind's eye the vision of a

book in which all the vain speaking of the world was recorded, to be read out at the last day. She did not consider how much an occasional flash of humour would lighten this appalling work, nor had it ever struck her that this view of the case might perhaps make prosiness the unpardonable sin. She flew upon poor Sissy at once with an involved sentence about her approaching marriage—a new life, new duties—‘and, remember, new responsibilities.’

‘Oh, but Percival is going to take those,’ said Sissy. ‘I think he likes them.’

‘He cannot take them,’ said Mrs. Bradley, austere, grating the words one against the other as they came out. Sissy only replied by a nervous little laugh, and was reproved for levity. Then the clergywoman went on to tell her that she had never taken sufficient interest in her fellow-creatures, and that now was the time to make a fresh start, and deliberately to aim at doing good.

There was enough truth in the accusation to make the poor little victim wince. Caring for her fellow-creatures, and doing good, meant giving things to the poor, and talking to them, she supposed; and she was well aware that she had never done anything of the kind. Aunt Harriet had always

disposed of her boots, indeed of all her old clothes, without consulting her ; and she had not taken to district visiting, Sunday-school teaching, or any sort of parish work. She had an idea that it was wrong to be so indifferent, but she was quite sure that she could not possibly go calling at cottages, giving away tickets, and reading chapters to sick people. If that were goodness, she must continue wicked.

Mrs. Bradley waited for her to speak.

'Oh, I'll think about it,' said Sissy, hurriedly, with a terrible certainty in her heart that she should think about it against her will. 'But I shan't be able to do anything at present. We are not going to have a house just at first ; we mean to travel.'

'There is an immense field for such work on the Continent,' was the remorseless reply.

'Oh, no ! oh, no ! I couldn't really,' exclaimed Sissy, alternately hot and cold, in her terror lest a pledge of some kind should be extorted from her—to give a tract to the Pope, perhaps, or publicly to denounce Italian idolatry.

'Among those benighted nations——' Mrs. Bradley began.

'But I couldn't talk to them. Percival is going to do all the talking.'

‘I hope—I can but hope, Sissy—that you will not rely too much on Mr. Percival Thorne.’

‘But I have forgotten such a lot of my French, you can’t think. And, Mrs. Bradley, I never did know any Italian, except two songs, and they are not Sunday ones. Perhaps when we get back and are settled——’

‘Do not deceive yourself,’ said Mrs. Bradley, awfully. ‘Do not put it off to a convenient season. When you are settled, you say; but you will never be settled. Here we have *no* continuing city, oh, remember that!’

About this time Mrs. Middleton arrived, and Sissy managed to escape, how she hardly knew, except that it was not without a parting word. She ran down the garden to find Percival. ‘Oh, dear, how dreadful she is!’ thought Sissy as she fled. ‘I do believe I promised to wrestle in prayer, or how could it have got into my head? Well, I’m glad it isn’t any worse. What would Percival say if I went giving those nasty little tracts to the waiters and people, and leaving them about the hotels?’

She found him, and as soon as she had a little recovered her breath and her composure, she told him of the interview,

mimicking most of it cleverly enough, in spite of a little unsteady laugh which would come at intervals. Percival, leaning on the fence, laughed too, in quiet enjoyment of Mrs. Bradley's rasping tones, as Sissy reproduced them for his benefit.

'Oh, yes, it's all very fine for you,' she said, when her story was finished, 'standing there, smiling, with your hands in your pockets, and hearing it all, now that it's over.'

'But it wasn't so pleasant for you? No, poor child.'

'Nor for Aunt Harriet now,' said Sissy.

'Good heavens! Aunt Harriet is still in her clutches! What shall we do, Sissy? Shall we go and make faces at Mrs. Bradley through the window? Or raise an alarm of fire? Suggest something.'

'Then I'll suggest that I think I hear her pony-chaise driving away. Look out by those larches—she must pass there.'

'And so she does!' he exclaimed, after half a minute of suspense.

'Percival,' said Sissy, 'she's an awful woman.'

'She is.'

'But I'm afraid what she said is partly true. Don't you think one ought to try and

do good to people? I never have. I'm afraid it's wrong.'

He recoiled in dismay. 'You haven't pledged yourself to do good to me? Sissy, speak!'

'Don't be silly. I'm serious.'

'Then I think I ought to have been told beforehand. Oh, Sissy! so is Mrs. Bradley. Be warned in time.'

'But I mean it, Percival. It isn't that I want to do anyone any good, particularly,' said Sissy, with delicious frankness; 'but I'm afraid I ought. Isn't it very wicked not to care? Don't you think I ought to try?'

'No, I don't,' said Percival.

'No? Why?'

'It is such a confused business at present,' he answered. 'Suppose you set a hundred people to explain the art of doing good, you would get a hundred different ideas as to what was meant. Suppose I meet a beggar and give him sixpence, is it a merit or a crime? No opinion on the subject is anything like unanimous. So, till they make up their minds—unless I am very much inclined the other way—I think I may as well keep my sixpences; they are handy things. Why should I part with them on purpose to be told that I have demoralised somebody?'

'But, Percival, I don't understand. Oughtn't anybody to try to do good?'

'The people who have a vocation,' he replied. 'The people who, blunder as they will, prejudiced and ignorant though they may be, harm though they may sometimes do, yet rise above it all, and bless the world by sheer force of love. If you have this sublime calling—well. But doing good, as popularly understood or misunderstood, is such a horribly aggressive proceeding. I would as soon go about giving people shocks, on the chance that galvanism might be good for some of them. Be kind in small things, mercifully just in great; try not to do any harm. It isn't a very exalted ideal, perhaps, Sissy, but I haven't got any further yet.'

'Is that really all?' she said.

'I'm not used to summing up my ideas. Suppose I add, Look up and wait.'

'But, Percival,' she hesitated; 'if that were all, you wouldn't think so very much about it, if anyone told a fib.'

'*What?*' he exclaimed. 'What can you think of me, Sissy? Good heavens! Why truthfulness is an absolute necessity, if one would not despise oneself and all mankind. It is the very ground we stand on—bare and uncommonly ugly sometimes, I grant you—

but without it no building is possible. I did not *say*, "Be truthful," and therefore I do not care for truth! You might as well declare that I did not care for modesty because I would not insult a woman by telling her to be modest!

He spoke rapidly and almost fiercely, but paused suddenly as if he had just become aware of it. 'I beg your pardon, Sissy,' he said, in an altered tone. 'I can't be very calm on that subject, I'm afraid. There are so many shams now-a-days, down to a sham contempt of shams.'

She leant against the fence, gazing at him with frightened eyes. One hand was firmly pressed to still her wildly beating heart; but when he apologised for his vehemence she faintly smiled.

'I'm afraid that dreadful old woman has upset you a little,' he said, anxiously.

She acquiesced, and went away. But, if the truth which he loved so much could have been revealed, perhaps the blame would have rested on that dreadful young man.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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